

The Protectors of Harmony

by Delta Blade

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Summary: The year is 2558, six months after the UNSC Infinity's incident on Requiem. Captain Thomas Lasky and his crew have finally found the other half of the Librarian's "Janus" key; but when the map leads them to an Equestria in crisis, they are forced to save it. For, if Equestria falls, so too will the six forerunner artifacts discovered on this planet: The Elements of Harmony.

1. You'll Need a Map

Hey guys! This is just an author's note. There is a map that my story requires you to refer to throughout my story.

To access this map:

Go to Google Images

Type "equestria and beyond" into the searchbox

Grab any of the images from the top row to use as your map (*note* my story is focused entirely on lower right hand side of this map!)

Hope you enjoy the story!

****Disclaimer: ****I did NOT make this map. All credit for making this map goes to Deviantart.****

2. Chapter 1: Back for Blood

****Chapter 1: Back for Blood****

****August 4, 2558****

****1800 hours****

****The Scorchedlands (575 miles southwest of Equestrian borders)****

****The Changeling Grand Palace/Military Training Grounds****

Queen Chrysalis sat on her throne. She was silently fuming, her face a contorted screen of rage. It had been almost a year since she and her army were defeated in Canterlot; and she was determined to have her revenge.

“They will rue the day” she thought.

Her anger turned to joy however, as her most trusted General trotted through the grand gates into her throne room. He wore a dark purple helmet, a hole through the top to allow his horn to protrude, as well as the flowing dark blue robe used to identify all non-combat officers. He marched about three-fourths of the way between the doors and the Queen’s throne before he stopped, and then spoke.

"My Queen," said the General before bowing to his superior.

"General Hives," said Chrysalis coolly. "What news do you have for me?"

"Our armies are ready your highness," said General Hives. "Just give us the word."

"Excellent!" said the ecstatic monarch. "May I observe?"

"Of course, your highness."

They then proceeded to walk out into a long hallway; making their way to a balcony that overlooked the training grounds. When they reached said balcony, the General was once again the first to speak.

"I trust you will be pleased with our progress my Queen," said Hives smugly as they both looked down upon their troops in training. "Our weaponry has advanced well beyond that of the Equestrian armed forces. Observe our training exercise."

Hives pointed to a changeling trooper in front of three pony combat training mannequins. He was holding a black spear with an emerald green point in his two front hooves, and was standing on his hind legs. Suddenly, the drill instructor used his magic to make the central mannequin bolt forward. In a flash, the changeling spun left and sliced the poor mannequin’s head right off. The instructor then levitated the mannequin that was now in front of the changeling soldier forward. He quickly decapitated his second adversary by performing the same technique as before, but to the right that time. Then, before the instructor could move the third one, the trainee sliced it in two; the head and forelegs on one half, and the hind legs and tail on the other.

"Very impressive dance show General," said a now unimpressed and indignant Chrysalis. "But I see no new weaponry at all! I specifically remember soldiers of Celestia’s Royal Guard wielding spears that look almost exactly like those!"

"Patience my Queen," said the changeling General. "The demonstration

is not yet over."

Suddenly, the drill instructor used his magic to levitate over twenty pony mannequins over a hill in an all out charge on the changeling soldier.

"You are about to see, your majesty, that our spears aren't, _exactly_ like those of the Royal Guard," said Hives.

What happened next caught Chrysalis off guard: the changeling soldier took a knee and held his spear at his waist, the tip pointed directly at the oncoming charge. Then the changeling's horn and spear began to glow bright green; as he was clearly using his magic to make the spear do _something._

What that something was however, would leave the changeling Queen nearly speechless.

The spear's tip began to not only glow, but _shine_ _bright green_ before a brilliant beam of green-colored energy burst from the tip, incinerating the lead mannequin instantaneously.

Queen Chrysalis could only let her jaw drop as the trainee managed to keep the beam going, aiming it left and right through his crowd of targets; it incinerated every pony mannequin that was unfortunate enough to get caught in its linear maelstrom of burning destruction.

"They'll _never_ see it coming," General Hives said smugly. "We designed the spear to channel the energy of the user's magic into the tip and then amplify its power tenfold. It then holds it there until the user wishes to fire. The magic is under the user's control during the whole process; it is the _user's_ magic after all. Also, a single beam isn't the only thing that can be fired; the spear can throw anything the user's mind can think of: from the single beam you saw, to explosive balls of fire, to even a siphoning beam that can siphon a unicorn's magic."

"General," Chrysalis began. "If I've ever told you that you've outdone yourself, I was sadly mistaken. _Now, _you've outdone yourself!"

"Thank you, my Queen."

"You said the troops were ready?"

"Yes, my Queen, they're right down there actually."

He pointed straight down off the balcony, and when Chrysalis looked, she saw what must have been entire battalions of troops right below her; each and every one of them wielding the same type of spear that was just demonstrated to her.

"How did I not notice them?" said the incredulous monarch.

"First, second, and third divisions are ready for deployment your highness," said Hives. "The amassment of fourth division will soon be complete."

"Outstanding! We will hold the fourth in reserve," said Chrysalis

before pointing straight down at the troops below her. "Right now, see to it that _they_ start cutting a path to the north, _straight_ to Equestria!"

"Yes, your highness," said General Hives before he moved to the very edge of the balcony and placed both his front hooves over the railing. The division leaders below saw him and gave crisp salutes.

"Gentlecolts! Preseeeeeeeaaant _hooves!_" commanded each division leader. Immediately, every changeling on the ground put their spears in their left hooves and gave crisp salutes to their General above.

Hives then used his magic to increase the volume of his voice to the point where he was his own loudspeaker.

"Our Queen has given us the word!" he announced before pointing to the northeast. "Move north to Equestria, and obliterate everything that stands in your way! For the Queen!"

"FOR THE QUEEN!" shouted the troops in a powerful battle cry before taking to the sky.

Any ray of the waning sun that wasn't already blocked out by the smoke coming from surrounding volcanoes was almost entirely blocked out by the changelings' numbers.

After a minute of watching his troops fly away, General Hives then used his magic to contact the division leaders telepathically.

"All division leaders, report," he said out loud.

"Leader of first is ready to receive orders."

"Leader of second reporting."

"Leader of third hears you loud and clear."

"Gentlecolts," said the general. "Here are your orders: first division is to fly north across the water to Canida; your objective is to capture its capital of Ottapaw. When those dogs surrender, have the entire division occupy the country until further orders arrive. Understood?"

"Yes sir!"

"Second and third, you two are to head east to Boardor. Your job is to capture that territory from the boars; leave two platoons from second behind for the occupation. The rest of you are to then fly north to Canida to regroup with first. Understood?"

"Yes sir!"

On those last set of commands, Queen Chrysalis saw two-thirds of the group break away from the full force, changing their headings eastward.

"And so it begins," she said smugly.

"Even if they _do_ see us coming," said the General after disconnecting with his troops. "There`s _no way_ they`ll be able to stop us!"

The two shared a maniacal laugh as they headed back inside.

****Disclaimer:****** Yes, I ****_**know**_**** the changelings` spears work like the rings of the Green Lantern Corps. I do ****_**not **_**own** any rights for ****_**The Green Lantern, Halo, **_**or **_**My Little Pony Friendship is Magic.**_**** Don't forget to comment and favorite! Thanks! :)**

3. Chapter 2: No Other Choice

****Chapter 2: No Other Choice****

****August 5, 2558****

****0900 hours****

****Canterlot****

****The Royal Castle****

Princess Celestia sat on her throne, her face calm and relaxed; reflecting the same feelings she had within. Her faithful student, Twilight Sparkle, recently became an alicorn. She was no longer her student, but a fellow princess (put in charge of Ponyville). Overall, Equestria was enjoying an era of peace and prosperity and the light of harmony seemed to hit every corner of this wonderful land.

It would never last.

Celestia was surprised when her sister, Princess Luna, trotted in. Celestia had recently appointed her the commander in chief of all Equestrian military forces across the known world (she was still to take orders from Celestia herself though). The distressed look on her face along with the quickened pace of her trotting told Celestia that she was nervous; and that meant she definitely didn't have good news for her. As Celestia stood, Luna spoke.

"My sister," said Luna as both princesses moved toward each other. "News from Pretuskria."

"Boardor?" asked Celestia. "What`s wrong with them? Nothing those boars can`t handle I'm hoping."

"I'm afraid to say that you are mistaken my sister. I recently received this recorded message from the Equestrian embassy there."

Luna`s horn then lit up and her eyes began to glow. She used her magic to darken the room and project a rectangular image on the wall. Suddenly, the image began to move; the message was playing. There was a white unicorn on the screen wearing the silver armor plating of the Royal Equestrian Army, his horn lit with the magic used to send the message; he seemed out of breath and there were burn marks on his face.

Burn marks? Thought the sun princess._ What`s going on?_

"Princess!" said the stallion on screen. "I don't know if you`re receiving this, hell, I don't even know if anypony will _ever_ see this recording, but the _changelings_ are back! They just came straight out of the mountains at 0600, a whole _swarm_ of `em! And that`s not the worst part. I don't know how, but they`re shooting at us! I don't know how they`re able to do that but they`re _shooting_ at us! With beams that can incinerate a whole pony andâ€|and balls of _fire!_ _They shoot those from above while they`re flying. We can barely get close to `em without getting our flanks burned!"

He paused to catch his breath, for he had been rambling with only two.

"We can`t hold out for much longer, and I don't think I can sur-"

He would never finish that thought, as a door opened off-screen and the unicorn`s eyes widened in fear as he looked towards it.

"Gotcha!" said an unknown voice from off-screen before a blast of green energy grazed the stallion`s face.

He fell off-screen screaming in pain.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH! AAAAHHH! AHHH MY FACE IS BURNING! I CAN FEEL IT MELTING!"

A changeling soldier holding a black spear with a green tip walked into view on his hind legs, laughing at the agony of his newest victim; suddenly, his laughter ceased.

"Hold on, this one`s Equestrian!" said the changeling. "A unicorn huh?"

He looked straight at Celestia.

"And he`s sending a message to his people. I suppose it will end when he wants it toâ€|or when he`s dead. Listen closely, whoever this is, the changelings are _back!_ And it is _us_ who are dominant above all other species on this earth! _We _are superior to _all!_ _We _are the ones meant to rule the world!"

He then moved over to the dying pony at his feet, still writhing in pain.

"See how _weak _you areâ€|how _inferior! _Whatever Equestrian is watching this, pray to Celestia, and watch how she will finally fail you. Equestria. _Will._ **FALL!**"

And on that last note, he lifted his spear up, and brought the tip down off-screen, presumably into his victim`s head.

Suddenly, the room filled itself with light once again as the message ended, cut short by the sender`s sudden death.

The stunned silence that followed was finally broken by

Celestia.

"How long ago did you receive that message?" she asked.

"Around five minutes ago," Luna answered. "I'm guessing that, by now, Pretuskria has fallen and Boardor has surrendered to the changeling army; and by the time we figure out how to make projectile weapons that can match those of the changelings` it will be too late."

"They managed to conquer a city _that big_ in only _three hours?!"_

"I'm afraid so, my sister."

Celestia began to pace back and forth, trying desperately to think of a solution. Her search seemed to be in vain, when she suddenly looked up at the ceiling with a gasp.

"Yes! That`ll do it! There`s still hope."

"How? I hate to sound so negative my sister but, _how _is there _any _hope for Equestria _now? _What hope could there possibly _be?"_

"Humans."

Luna`s eyes widened in fear.

"You`re not serious are you?" said Luna incredulously.

"My sister," said Celestia calmly. "We have no other choice if Equestria is to survive."

"No! There`s always a choice!" said Luna as she and her sister took their discussion outside onto a balcony. "Besides, the humans are too dangerous and you _know_ it!"

"True, there _are_ other choices," said Celestia as she looked up at the sky. "Other species that are just as powerful. But of all the most powerful out there, humanity is one of the few that would do _anything _to protect harmony. I _know _there is good in them! Plus, we need help _now;_ and, as destiny may have it, the humans are the closest ones to us."

"How close?"

Celestia looked back at her solar counterpart; and as her horn began to glow, she smiled and answered, "They`re already here."

4. Chapter 3: Six for One?

****Chapter 3: Six for One?****

****August 5, 2558****

****0900 hours (Equestrian Time)****

****The Milky Way Galaxy: Cygnus arm****

****The bridge of the UNSC **_**Infinity**_**

Captain Thomas Lasky had never been so exited in all his life; a rare smile stretched across his face. In his right hand he held the one half of the Librarian`s Janus Key that Spartan Fireteam Majestic had recovered on Requiem; in his left, the other half that Dr. Halsey had just handed to him with her new, prosthetic left arm; she had lost her left arm during the battle that had raged on said planet.

"Uhhâ€|Doc?" said Roland, the ship`s A.I. "You sure you know what you`re doing?"

"Hey, _I _still don't trust her," said Spartan Commander Sarah Palmer.

"You _never_ trusted me," said Dr. Catherine Halsey. "But I'm afraid that you have no choice _but _to Spartan, given that I`m the only one in here who actually _saw_ the Librarian use the key."

"Palmer, curiosity may have killed the cat-" Captain Lasky started.

"-and salted the snail," said Roland.

"Thank you Roland," said Lasky, slightly annoyed.

"No problem, sir," said the yellow, WW2 fighter pilot hologram of Roland.

The Captain returned his attention to the Spartan Commander.

"But how would the rest of the cats and snails have learned from their comrade`s mistake?"

"Fine," said an irritated Palmer. "Let`s just get this over with."

"Okay," said Lasky before he looked to Doctor Halsey. "So, how exactly did the Librarian do this?"

"She just," said Halsey before pausing and then clapping her hands together. "Slapped them together."

"Really?" said Lasky in disbelief. "That`s it?"

"They should feel like magnetic puzzle piecesâ€|or something like that."

"Okay," said the Captain before taking a deep breath. "Here goes nothing."

He held the two pieces out in front of him and slowly brought them together. Suddenly, he felt the magnetic attraction between them, and they pulled each other together.

With a metallic *c_lang*_ and a small flash of light, the room was instantly filled with a three-dimensional hologram of what seemed like a bunch of floating, blue gyroscopes.

Lasky realized that he had closed his eyes out of fear. He first opened one eye, to see if he was still alive, and then opened the other to find them both greeted with the sight of the bridge full of astonished faces; except for Dr. Halsey, who was looking at the Captain with an amused smile. A moment later, Lasky broke the stunned silence.

"So," said Lasky. "This is the map?"

"Yes," Halsey responded. "This is it. Although I must admit, I'd forgotten how big it was."

"Captain," said Roland. "If the map is too big for you, I can shrink it down if you place it on the hologram table."

Lasky looked at the table in the center of the room; the grid atop it glowing a turquoise blue shade.

"Alright," he said.

As he walked, the entire map moved with him.

"So I guess this explains why I was only seeing half of it," said Dr. Henry Glassman, the Infinity's Chief Engineer and head scientist as he dodged one of the blue gyroscopes.

"Yeah," Lasky responded as he centered the Janus Key on the grid. "No wonder."

Suddenly, every floating gyroscope on the bridge flew towards the hologram table as Roland condensed the map into a holographic picture of the Milky Way Galaxy.

"There you have it Captain," said Roland. "The locations of every piece of Forerunner tech in the galaxy right in front of you."

"Outstanding Roland," said the Captain, all resentful feelings of the A.I. forgotten. Lasky gazed at the map for a moment before continuing. "How 'bout we start small? Roland, locate the nearest artifact to our current location."

"Way ahead of ya boss, I've already located the nearest six artifacts for you."

"Six? That's a pretty strange, number to stop at. Zoom in on them."

"Yessir," said Roland as the map began to expand. Since the map was now contained within the hologram table's borders, anything that passed them was dropped off and no longer displayed.

Roland continued to zoom until only one big gyroscope was displayed on the table.

"All six artifacts are located on this planet, sir," he said.

"Six for one?" said Lasky excitedly. "And this one's close, it's still in the Cygnus arm. Take us there, Roland."

"You got it, boss," said Roland as he got on the ship`s main intercom. "Attention all hands, prep for slip-space jump!"

** . . . **

August 5, 2558

0905 hours (Equestrian Time)

The Milky Way Galaxy: Cygnus arm

1500 miles above Equestria

The bridge of the UNSC **_Infinity**_

The _Infinity_ emerged from a blue portal in orbit above a surprisingly Earth-like planet. Although Dr. Glassman wasn`t the first one to notice this fact, no one was surprised that he was the first to _mention_ it.

"By the looks of it sir," said Glassman as he and a few others were looking out the window on the Bridge`s observation deck. "I'd say this planet is eligible to support life."

"Great," said Palmer sarcastically. "More aliens. Just what we needâ€|again."

"You know," started Dr. Halsey. "Due to the sheer mathematical odds, there _has_ to be another species out there that isn't as hostile as the Covenant."

"All we can do is hope that there`s at least one on this planet that`s a little nicer," said Roland.

"If there _are_ any, we should try contacting them," Lasky declared. "See if they know about the artifacts."

"Ummâ€|sir?" said Roland. "I don't think that will be necessary."

All eyes turned to the A.I.`s yellow, holographic Avatar.

"And why`s that, Roland?" Lasky inquired.

"Because the _Infinity_ appears to be receiving a signal," said Roland, looking around as if there was a fly in the room and he was following it with his eyes, before looking directly at his Captain. "From the planet itself."

5. Chapter 4: First Contact

Chapter 4: First Contact

August 5, 2558

0905 hours

Canterlot

****The Royal Castle****

Princess Celestia and her sister Princess Luna stood on a balcony overlooking the palace courtyard. Celestia was looking at the sky, her horn glowing bright yellow, and Luna did NOT seem to like what her sister was doing.

"What are you doing?!"_ asked Princess Luna. "Don`t contact them!"

"Do you have a better idea?" Celestia retorted.

"We could get the griffons to help us."

"Please, you and I both know that they wouldn't be as much help to us; their weaponry is just as far behind the changelings` as ours is. And griffons aren't very fond of us ponies anyway."

"And both you and I also know how primitive and dangerous humans can be."

Celestia took a deep breath and looked at her sister with a smile.

"I know my sister," said Celestia. "I know how dangerous they can be; I've been observing them for quite some time now, longer than you have I'm sure. I've seen the wars they've fought with each other, the kind of evil they were capable of, but most importantly, I've seen the capacity for good in their hearts."

"If there is one thing I have truly seen in humanity, it`s that there will always be humans who fight the right fight and that the good in them always conquers the evil that took up the same space."

"Humans have always been seeking some form of harmony with each other; it`s just that they always seem to go about it in the wrong way. But just the fact that they are, by nature, seeking out harmony, tells me that they would do anything to protect it when they found it."

Before Luna could respond, Celestia suddenly picked up a voice on the other end of her signal.

"_This is Captain Thomas Lasky of the UNSC Infinity. We are receiving your signal, if you are hearing this, please respond."_

**** . . . ****

****August 5, 2558****

****0905 hours (Equestrian Time)****

****The Milky Way Galaxy: Cygnus arm****

****1500 miles above Equestria****

****The bridge of the UNSC **_**Infinity**_**

"So _they_`re contacting_ us," _said Lasky with subtle astonishment.
"Can you put it through, Roland?"

"Yes sir," said Roland.

Lasky walked over to the center of the observation deck and cleared his throat. Though he knew it was unlikely that these aliens spoke English, he didn't know any other options.

"Okay," said Roland. "I think that should do it. Go ahead, Captain."

"This is Captain Thomas Lasky of the UNSC_ Infinity,"_ he announced."We are receiving your signal, if you are hearing this, please respond."

To everyone`s surprise, not only was there an _immediate_ response, but it was, in fact, spoken in clear English.

"This is Princess Celestia, ruler of Equestria. Our species is in dire need of help from yours."

"Whoa, wait, hold on," said Lasky, quite stunned. "Your _species?_ Where didâ€|how didâ€|_whoa!"_

"Wow," said an incredulous Roland. "I did _not_ see _that_ coming."

"_I know this probably wasn`t what you were expecting, and that your species has _serious_ trust issues, but _please, _you _must _trust us. We desperately need your help."_

"Who is _we?"_ said Lasky.

"_We are a race of intelligent and peaceful equines who inhabit a land of love, happiness, and harmony. My sister and I rule over it. We haven`t fought a war in almost a thousand years and now face a more technologically advanced species that wants nothing more than our slaughter. Please_, _we need your help! _Please _help us!"_

"The crew of my ship and I came here only to find a number of forerunner artifacts on your planet."

"_Forerunner artifacts?"_

"Yes, but I suppose your situation is worth looking in to."

There was a moment of silence before the Princess continued, her tone now one of more composure and less desperation.

"_Thank you. Come down to the planet surface so we may discuss our negotiation."_

"Looking forward to it, ma`am. Lasky out."

"Uhhâ€|Captain?" said Roland as soon as the conversation ceased. "I'm not sure how but, that signal broadcasted this over the intercom and, the _entire ship_ just heard your little tÃªte-Ãª -tÃªte."

"God dammit Roland!" said an irritated Lasky.

"It was the signal's fault! I couldn't control it," said Roland, throwing his holographic hands up in innocence. "And look on the bright side, this will save you the speech, won't it?"

The Captain took a deep breath before continuing. "I suppose you're right. But I'll still have to deal with whatever complaints start coming my way, like a mutiny, hopefully not."

"I'd agree it's not too likely, sir."

"Yeah, but going back to business now. Roland, I need you to take us down through the atmosphere. Then call in Fireteam Icebreaker and tell them to meet me in hangar bay C. I want a pelican prepped and ready for launch as soon as we're below this planet's troposphere."

"Yes sir!" said Roland before his avatar disappeared with a crisp salute.

"Wait! Captain," said Palmer. "What about Halsey? I know we've agreed not to kill her, but doesn't FLEETCOM already think she's dead?"

"Probably," said Dr. Halsey.

"Don't worry about her, I'll handle FLEETCOM," said Lasky. "Right now, it seems that I need to meet with a certain princess."

6. Chapter 5: First Meetings

****Chapter 5: First Meetings****

****August 5, 2558****

****0906 hours****

****Canterlot****

****The Royal Castle****

Luna stared at her sister in utter disbelief for what she had just done. Then she thought for a moment, and then sighed before giving her response.

"Okay, I understand your reasoning, and I agree that we should recruit them." she said. "But you do know you're going to have to tell them that you've been watching them."

"You know as well as I do that that should be the least of our worries," said Celestia. "For one thing, we'll have to tell the public something about all this."

"Princess!" called a royal guard from within.

Both alicorns looked, and then ran, back inside the throne room to meet him. The guard was sweating profusely and, to their surprise, was holding a newspaper with his magic.

He held it out to his two leaders before speaking.

"This is today`s issue of the _Canterlot Times, _your highness," he said. "I don't know how the press got a hold of this information butâ€|Oh! Just look at the front page headline!"

Both princesses did so, and what they saw made them gasp inside.

**The Changelings Declare War!**

**Is Equestria Safe? The Destruction of Boardor leaves an uneasy answer to this question.**

"How could this happen?!" demanded Celestia.

"I just _told_ you! I don't know!" the guard responded.

"Actually, my sister," Luna interjected. "I should have probably told you this earlier, but the message sent to me from the soldier in Boardor was automatically sent to his family as well."

"What?!" asked Celestia. "Why?"

"I'm not sure, maybe he also wanted to say goodbye to his family, but forgot to in his haste. And also, the family that owns the _Canterlot Times_ was the family of that soldier."

"So _that_ would explain how this information got out so quickly," said the guard. "The crowd is in a frenzy."

"And then there`s that," said Celestia. "What _crowd?!_"

"Oh yeah, I was going to tell you both about this crowd that`s gathered out in front of the palace, but then you two got caught up in your little banter," said the guard as he pointed at the newspaper in his magical grip._ "Anyway, _they`re all demanding an explanation for this."

"You couldn`t have told her that _first?!_" Luna yelled at the guard as her sister walked towards the exit. "Tia, what will you do?"

"They deserve to know," declared Celestia. "Plus the best alibi for a massive human ship coming down from space would be that they`ve come here to protect us."

"You know what? That alibi might actually _increase_ public morale!"

"Exactly, so if you`ll excuse me," said Celestia as she exited the throne room through its massive double doors.

The white alicorn moved towards the balcony at the front of the palace to address the crowd. When she reached it, she saw that the looks on everypony`s faces were those of absolute terror.

She then used her magic to increase the volume of her voice so that even the ponies in the far back of the crowd could hear her. She took a deep breath and began her speech.

"My fellow Equestrians," she began. "I'm sure you've all heard the news. The changelings have indeed returned and are heading this way."

Celestia felt a knot of guilt form in her stomach as gasps and shrieks popped their way around the crowd.

Nevertheless, she kept her composure, and continued.

"The changelings' weapons technology is far superior to ours and every civilization that stands in their way."

The knot tightened as more ponies began to shriek while others started hugging each other and sobbing into one another's shoulders.

All the same, she retained her composure and continued further.

"However, there is still hope. My sister and I have recruited a powerful ally to aid us."

At the sound of hope, the mood of the crowd immediately changed: the sobbing and shrieking stopped; everything became eerily silent, as everypony was now eager to hear who this ally was.

"They call themselves humans. They are an alien race that has endured great hardship in the past; a species that always tries to find harmony, but never goes about it in the right way. They know how to fight a war better than we do, and certainly better than the changelings. Their weapons technology can match that of the changeling arsenal. They will save us from the changeling threat, and in return, we will show them the path to true harmony. These humans can be trusted, although it may take time for them to trust you. They are a good species at heart. They deserve our friendship. And thankfully, they have come to us at the best time. Now."

Celestia pointed at the sky behind the crowd, and everypony followed her hoof.

What everypony saw caused more shrieks and apprehensive mumbling to ripple through the crowd.

A giant, blackish grey cylinder hovered eerily, and almost menacingly, above Ponyville. It had a pattern on one end that glowed blue. On its side read the words UNSC INFINITY.

"Do not be alarmed, for that is their spaceship," said Celestia. "As long as you see that ship, we will be safe. Be as hospitable as you can to the humans on board, for they are here to save our lives."

Suddenly, Celestia saw a single, small craft of some sort emerge from the distant ship; it was heading towards Ponyville.

The alicorn princess used her magic to bring her voice back down to its normal volume before saying to herself, "Oh dear, I forgot to tell them where to land!"

** . . . **

August 5, 2558

0910 hours

Ponyville

The Golden Oaks Library

It was a quiet day in Ponyville. That was, of course, until the news got out that the changelings had returned. The _Foal Free Press_, no longer just a school newspaper but the newspaper for all of Ponyville, had come out with a story regarding the family that owns the _Canterlot Times_, saying how their son had sent them a recorded message of his death and of the changeling soldier that condemned Equestria.

Princess Twilight Sparkle was in her library, pacing back and forth. Spike was on her back, holding that very newspaper in his claws, reading and rereading that same article. Neither Twilight nor Spike could believe that _any_ of this was happening.

"How could the changelings be _back?_" asked the incredulous purple dragon. "I thought they were all destroyed in that magical blast made by your brother and Cadence."

"That wouldn't _nearly_ be enough to destroy them," said the lavender alicorn. "It was only enough to banish their queen all the way to the Scorched Lands."

"That volcanic area just west of Boardor?" said Spike as he hopped off of Twilight's back.

"That's the one."

"Well, _that_ explains how they were able to reach Boardor so quickly."

Spike then headed towards the red door to exit his tree home.

"Oh my Celestia," he said. "I need some air."

At the sound of the sun princess's name, Twilight trotted over to her desk.

"That reminds me," she said. "I should probably inform the princess that I know of this predicament."

"Uhh, that may have to wait," said Spike, now looking up at the sky through the open door. "We've got bigger problems than sending a letter."

"But it's Princess _Celestia_ we're talking about here," said Twilight as she trotted over to the open door. "What could possibly be more important than thaâ€¦?"

Twilight trailed off as she looked to the sky. Above Ponyville loomed an object that the lavender unicorn could only describe as some sort of enormous, dark grey, cylindrically shaped rock that could somehow

float on its own. She could tell that it wasn't being lifted by some powerful unicorn because there was no magical aura surrounding it.

"What in Equestria is that?!" Twilight asked, nearly speechless.

"More importantly," said Spike, failing to conceal his fear. "What's that coming towards us?!"

Twilight suddenly realized, she was so busy looking at the big object, that she didn't notice the smaller one coming off it.

It headed straight for Ponyville.

"Spike, get back inside," said Twilight

"What're you gunna do?" asked Spike.

"I'm the princess here, I might as well be the first to talk to whatever's coming down here."

"Twilight, whatever's coming down could be here to kill you for all you know!"

"If they wanted to destroy ponykind, they'd have come down here with a larger force."

"You don't know that!"

"Spike, we have to at least try to see if they're friendly."

"And if they're not?"

"Then I'll think of something. Now get inside!"

Spike reluctantly did so, the alicorn watching him as he closed the door.

A faint humming caught Twilight's attention, making her turn back around towards the street and look up at the sky. The object had now gotten much closer; she concluded that it must have been some kind of flying, metal aircraft. She saw it turn parallel to the street and swoop to a stop in front of the library, flames jetting out some tubes on the wings and back flaps, scorching the grass under it.

Suddenly, a ramp on the back of the craft dropped and a group of bipedal creatures thundered out, leveling large devices in what must have been hands. Their bodies were a combination of black, dark green, and dark gray. On top were green heads with white faces.

Five of them were in front, kneeling. They had created some kind of semicircle formation around the backside of the craft. Then a sixth one descended from the ramp, holding a much smaller device in one hand, lifting it up, down, left, and right as if trying to get a better look at it in different shades of light.

And then what was most unexpected, was not that Twilight heard the sixth creature speak, but that it spoke in perfect

Equestrian.

"Scanning," it said with an accent that reminded Twilight of Rarity. "This atmosphere is 78% nitrogen, 21% oxygen, and 1% water vapor, carbon dioxide, and other trace amounts of gaseous particles."

Then the one closest to Twilight spoke, also in perfect Equestrian.

"Get to the point, corporal," it said, now looking back at the sixth one. Its accent was more like Twilight's, apart from the fact that it was masculine. "What's the verdict?"

"Somehow, the air is perfectly breathable," said the sixth one, the one called Corporal. "We can take our HAZOP masks off."

What happened next made the lavender alicorn shriek inside. All six creatures reached for their faces and pulled them off. She would have shrieked out loud if she hadn't realized that they were only taking off their masks.

Underneath those masks were their actual faces, made of what seemed to be smooth, rubbery skin, two eyes, a nose, and a mouthful of teeth.

Corporal then turned and looked back inside the craft.

"Captain!" it said, doing what Twilight concluded was beckoning for something inside to come out.

And come out it did. It gave its mask to Corporal as it walked forward. Other than the metal pad on its left shoulder, this one wore only cloth coverings: on his left and right arms were three golden yellow stripes pointing downward with a sunburst star of the same color on top. It had short, brown mane that seemed natural and not cut.

"Thank you, Corporal Williams," said the cloth covered one. "Now let's figure out where we are."

** . . . **

August 5, 2558

0914 hours

In the L.Z. on an unknown planet

In the middle of an unknown town

"You know, she never told us where to land," said Private First Class Ogden Jenkins as he handed his mask to Corporal Marcus Williams to stow back inside the Pelican.

"I know, right? You'd think she'd be a little more specific," said the corporal as he jogged back inside with all the masks.

"Maybe she'll come to us," said Sergeant Alex Thompson.

"Yeah right, sarge," said Private Eugene Phillips. "Or maybe she just

ain't thinking today."

"Hey! Lock that tone down, Shifty," said Gunnery Sergeant David Alvarez. "We want to make a good impression on the equines of this planet, and insulting their leader _isn't_ going to help."

"Aye, aye, gunny," said Shifty.

"Uhhâ€|sir?" said Private Oscar Morgan. "That purple one`s moving toward us."

"We`ve gone over the rules of engagement, Sidney," gunny whispered. "Shoot only if attacked."

Gunny then turned to Captain Laskey.

"Captain?" he said. "What should we do?"

As Laskey walked past the line of marines, he smiled and said, "Ask for directions."

As he approached the horned and winged animal, _it_ was the first to speak.

"Ummâ€|hello," it said in a feminine voice. "My name is Twilight Sparkle, _Princess _Twilight Sparkle. Welcome to Equestria."

Twilight Sparkle?! thought Laskey. _Oh, I'll just ask it later._

It held out a hoof to Laskey, who hesitantly shook it and responded.

"Captain Thomas Laskey of the UNSC _Infinity._ So _you_ must be the monarch who rules this country," said Laskey. "I'll be frank, I thought you`re tree-house would be more of a _palace_ if you know what I mean."

"Oh! Sorry, there seems to be a misunderstanding," said Twilight Sparkle. _"I_ don't rule this country. That`s Princess _Celestia`s_ job."

"Wait, but, you just said that _you_ were the princess."

"Yeah? And?"

"How can there be two princesses from the same country?"

"There are actually _three."_

"What?! Oh, _Jesus."_

"Excuse me?"

"Oh! Nothing, uhhâ€|would you happen to know where I could find this Princess Celestia?"

Twilight briefly and silently debated with herself on whether or not she should disclose Celestia`s location to this alien. In the end,

she figured that they seemed nice enough.

"She should be up in Canterl-"

Twilight would never finish that thought, as a sudden flash of light blinded everyone.

Laskey turned to Fireteam Icebreaker and saw them raising their rifles.

"Men!" he shouted as he ran over to them. "Hold your fire! Hold your fire!"

The Captain looked back and held a hand to his face to shield his eyes. As the light dissipated, he saw that a white alicorn, taller than Twilight, had materialized next to the lavender pony.

"So," said Laskey. "I'm guessing that you must be Princess Celestia?"

"I am," said the sun princess.

"The one who contacted my ship?"

"Yes."

"You know, you never told me where to land."

"I know. I give you my deepest apologies Captain Thomas Laskey."

"Wait!" interjected Twilight. "Princess, how do you know its name? He never told it to you yet."

"Oh yes he has," said the white alicorn. "And Twilight, you're a princess now. You can call me Celestia. Also, it is a he, and you will refer to him as such."

"Ohâ€|uhhâ€|"

"Sorry Twilight. I know this must be quite a bit to take in, but Laskey and I need to talk privately. I'll explain everything later."

Celestia then turned her attention back to Laskey.

"Captain, do you mind leaving your men in Twilight`s care before we depart? I'm sure they can answer all her questions."

"Ooh!" said Twilight excitedly. "I'd love to learn about a newly discovered species!"

"I'm sure we would tooâ€|" Thomas responded as he turned and looked back up at his ship, a thoughtful expression on his face. "â€|some of us anyway."

He then began walking back to his men.

"Captain, sir," said gunny, snapping a salute to his Captain.

The rest of the squad did the same.

"At ease. Okay marines, here's the deal," Laskey started. "I have to make what I'm guessing are 'peace' negotiations with the princess over there, the white one, not the lavender one. The lavender one would however, like to get to know our species a little better. While I'm out, I'd like you six to stay at her house while she asks you all some questions about the human race. Understood?"

"Aye, aye, sir!" said all six in unison.

Then gunny raised his hand and said, "Permission to speak, sir."

"Granted," said his Captain.

"I'd love to go into that tree-house, sir. But doesn't this sound like something the scientists would want to do? Namely Halsey or Glassman? Or both for that matter?"

"Oh don't worry, they'll get their chance. Don't tell anyone, but as soon as I'm absolutely sure that the equines of this planet are trustworthy, I'll bring them on the ship. Bring them to the scientists as a special treat. Plus, all the equipment's stuck up in the ship anyway; they'd be able to study them in better detail up there than down here. Does that make sense?"

"Yes sir."

"Okay. Just remember not to tell anybody, understand?"

"Yessir."

"Good. Now get to it marines!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" said all six in unison as they jogged over to the tree-house.

Once they were all inside, Laskey made his way over to Princess Celestia.

"So," the Captain started. "Guess it's just you and me now, huh?"

"So it would seemâ€¦" said Celestia as she observed pony bystanders gawking at Laskey, the aircraft behind him, or his ship up above. "This isn't the most private place to talk."

"Oh yeah. Why don't you tell me where your palace is, and I'll fly there in my pelican."

"Actually, why don't you tell the pilot of your, 'pelican,' to fly back to your ship. I know a quicker route."

"You sure about that?"

"Positively."

"You have seen how fast this thing was going, right?"

"Trust me, it`s faster."

"Oh-_kay," _said Laskey, bringing his wrist communicator to his mouth. "Echo 419, head back to the ship. I'm gunna be down here for a while. No need to waste fuel."

"Yes sir!" came a female voice from Laskey`s communicator. "Rolling out."

On that last note, the pelican rose upward, turned, and thundered back towards its gargantuan mastership.

"So," said Laskey. "What`s this route of yours?"

"Take my hoof," said Celestia as she extended her hoof to the Captain.

Laskey did so. Then the princess`s horn began to glow.

And in another bright flash of light, they were both gone.

****Author`s Note:****** Aaaaaaand it`s finally done! I'd just like all my faithful readers to know that, ****_**yes, **_**the chapters of this story are going to be **_**much**_** longer from now on. See you in the next one! ;D**
>

7. Chapter 6: Why We Fight for You

****Chapter 6: Why We Fight for You****

****August 5, 2558****

****0918 hours****

****Canterlot****

****The Royal Castle****

Inside Princess Celestia`s throne room, there was a bright flash of light. Out of it materialized the alicorn princess and Captain Thomas Laskey.

Immediately the human barfed out his breakfast out onto the scarlet colored carpet.

"*cough*Oh god," said the dazed and kneeling Captain, staring down at his mess. "I am _so_ sorry. *cough*I don't think my body was made*cough*for that kind of travel. *cough*That, or I just wasn't ready."

"Oh it`s quite alright," said Princess Celestia. "You humans have always been so, _resistant_ to magic."

"That reminds me," said Laskey as he stood up and regained his composure. "How do you know so much about humanity? You somehow knew about how powerful we`ve become, then you mentioned our 'trust

issues,' and now _this."_

Thomas motioned to his puddle of puke on the ground.

"Your species has been of great interest to me for quite some time now," said Celestia as she used her magic to toss the mess out an open window. "That shouldn't hit anypony."

"So you've been watching us," said Laskey. _"How?"_

"Like this," said Celestia as her horn began to glow again.

Suddenly, Laskey's vision blurred, then refocused. He was in a blue, cloudy landscape with stars floating around everywhere, like distant light bulbs suspended on tiny, invisible cables.

Celestia stood before him; they were both standing on a solid, yet invisible surface of some sort. Laskey was the first to speak.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Everywhere," responded the sun princess. "And nowhere."

"That doesn't even make any sense."

"It shouldn't. All you need to know is that this is where I go to observe what happens throughout the universe."

"How'd you find this place?"

"The Librarian showed it to me, so that I could watch over the universe after the rings were activated."

"Those rings wiped out every sentient being _in_ the universe. How'd _you_ survive?"

"The forerunners knew of the magic that my sister and I possessed; they knew the rings wouldn't be able to touch us if we didn't want them to, but they didn't care. The only reason they built the rings in the first place was because they were desperate to wipe out the flood. Since the Librarian knew my sister and I would survive, she thought it best for _us_ to be the new supervisors of the universe."

"Supervisors, but not protectors? If you saw that something in the universe was wrong, you wouldn't do a thing about it?"

"No, that's where you come in."

"Me?"

"Your species I mean. As you may know, the human race existed before the rings were activated. Up until then, your species was second only to the forerunners in terms of power."

"What kind of power?"

"The power of your mind and your military, _especially_ _your

military. In terms of that, I believe you and the forerunners were almost equal."

"Wow, we were really _that_ powerful?"

"Yes, your species was almost twice as technologically advanced as you are now, from what I've seen at least."

"Alright, so what does power have to do with it?"

"Before the rings were activated, the forerunners were the most powerful species in the galaxy _and_ they could see the universe by the simple means of coming to this place. Therefore, they held the mantle of responsibility to protect the galaxy."

"And if they were ever destroyed, we would be next in line?"

"Correct, the mantle would fall upon humanity`s shoulders. When both the forerunners and humanity were destroyed by the rings, humans came back because some of their D.N.A. was cataloged by the forerunners."

"Wait, hold on. How does an entire species come out of a catalogue?"

"Forerunner catalogues work a little differently from how you think human catalogues work. If the forerunners catalogue D.N.A. for example, they put it in a device that could regenerate the tissue, and therefore the entire being, back into existence at any specified time."

"Then they must`ve set it to sometime _after_ the rings had done their work."

"Right you are, Captain. After humanity came back, I still firmly believed that you were the rightful inheritors of the mantle. Come, walk with me."

Celestia began walking to Laskey`s left; he followed.

Suddenly, from some focal point in the distance, shot out squares of light to Laskey`s left and right, forming a kind of hallway with walls made of moving images.

On the images were just about everything, from scenes of a happy family sitting at home to scenes of war and destruction.

"I have observed and recorded everything humanity has done since your resurfacing after the rings," said Celestia. "Though you may have started off quite primitiveâ€|"

The two walked past a square showing a caveman playing with a rock.

"â€|you began to grow back to your former glory. Countries began to be formed, and wars began to be fought amongst yourselvesâ€|"

The duo then walked past another square, this one screening a sword battle being fought in a field by two opposing armies sometime in the

middle ages.

"â€¦soon, you started wanting to gain the upper hand on your enemies. You began advancing your weapons technology to new levels of destructionâ€¦"

They then strode past another square depicting a trench battle being fought with guns and artillery.

"â€¦you kept trying to invent new ways to kill each other in order to win wars. It nearly got out of handâ€¦"

They then passed by a square portraying a nuclear explosion in the middle of a desert.

"â€¦thankfully though, you were able to stop your own madness at the end of your second world war. You formed the United Nations, and then you looked to the stars. Humans were soon able to put their heads together to form the United Nations Space Command."

"How come none of this ever happened to your species?" asked Laskey. "The wars I mean?"

"The equines of Equestria abolished the very idea of warfare at the end of the first one we ever fought; I can barely even remember what it was like. Even to this day, I'm still not entirely sure why your species, or any other species for that matter, didn't abolish war as well."

"I guess some wars need to be fought."

"True, but the wars that needed to be fought, sometimes never even had to start. Not even the war you fought with the Covenant had to happen."

They stopped at a multiple squares all flicking through multiple battle scenes of human and Covenant forces clashing with one another, both on the ground and in space.

"The Covenant could have gone and activated the rings without getting humanity involved," said Celestia. "Humans would have never even known what the Covenant was doing had they not attacked you."

"I lost my girlfriend in that war," said Laskey.

"Yes, you know all too well that war cannot come without a cost; that victory cannot come without sacrifice. And that reminds me, if there's one thing that I've learnt about your species in all the time that I've been watching you, it's that you know how to bounce back. After everything that you suffer and survive through, you don't just bounce back to where you were before, you bounce even higher. Your species was almost completely annihilated after the Human-Covenant War, and just look where you are now. You may not be the humans I knew before the rings, but you are, once again, the giants of this galaxy."

"Hey, I thought that same thing when I became Captain of the Infinity."

"See? That's how prevalent that fact is."

"So what now?"

The square in front of them then switched to a scene depicting the Librarian handing the Janus Key over to Dr. Halsey.

"When the Librarian gave the Janus Key to Dr. Catherine Halsey, she henceforth conceded the mantle to humanity."

"Halsey told me about this; we're supposed to be the protectors of the galaxy now, right?"

"Yes."

"And now you want us to protect you? Also, am I going to puke again when we leave this place?"

Celestia smiled as her horn began to glow once again.

"No," she said. "You should be fine this time."

Laskey's vision blurred once again; when it had refocused, both he and the alicorn princess were back in the throne room.

"That was a very nice revelation, princess," said the Captain. "But something's telling me that there's more to this than meets the eye. You're making it sound like you can offer us something in return."

"Humans have always been searching for harmony, but have never gone about it in the right way; that revelation was meant to show you that," said the monarch. "We can show you the path."

"How?"

"I understand that you've come here looking for six forerunner artifacts, am I correct?"

"Yeah, howâ€¦how'd you know that?"

"Oh, just a lucky guess," said the princess sarcastically.

Both she and Laskey walked out onto a balcony, the Infinity looming in the distance.

"I'm guessing you know where they are?" said Thomas.

"They're closer than you think," said Celestia. "You remember Twilight Sparkle?"

"That purple alicorn that lives in a tree?"

"Yes. That tree is what houses the artifacts."

"Oh," said Laskey as he looked at the Princess. "Wait! My marines are in there!"

"Is there some concern?"

"Well, no. I doubt that they'll do anything stupid, but I should

still get down there before there`s some kind of miscommunication. I don't want _anything _happening to those artifacts."

"Would you like to me to teleport you again?"

"No offense, your majesty, but I think it`d be safer for me if I took my pelican this time."

"None taken," said the sun princess as she looked at the spot where Laskey had puked. "It`s quite understandable."

The Captain brought his communicator to his mouth and said, "Echo 419, this is Captain Laskey. I need pickup ASAP."

"Aye, aye, sir," came the same female voice. "Rolling in."

"You didn't even tell her where you were," said Celestia as Thomas brought the communicator down from his mouth.

"I didn't need to," said Laskey. "She can just pinpoint the source of my signal to find me; it helps to keep us from disclosing our locations over the radio."

"How come you couldn't pinpoint _my _signal?"

"Well, you see, you have to keep the signal _going _so it can be traced. _You_ had shut yours off."

"Oh," said the princess as she saw the pelican approaching in the distance. "My mistake I guess."

Laskey brought his wrist communicator back up to his mouth.

"Gunnery Sergeant David Alvarez," said Laskey. "Do you read?"

"Yes sir," came David's voice from the communicator.

"Are you still in Twilight`s house?"

"You mean her tree?"

"Yes."

"Then yeah, we`re still here, sir."

"The artifacts are in that house. Be sure to let your men know."

"Yes sir, I'll tell them, sir."

"And be sure to ask Twilight _where_ these artifacts are and what they look like."

"Yes sir, I'll ask her, sir."

"Once you have that Intel, do NOT _touch _or do anything of the sort to the artifacts; just make sure they don't go anywhere until I arrive, understood?"

"Yes sir."

At this point, the pelican had arrived, turned 180 degrees, and was lowering the ramp onto the balcony for Laskey to get on.

"Alright, I'm on my way with the princess. Laskey out," said Thomas before ending the transmission.

Laskey looked at the equine monarch and gestured to the inside of the pelican.

"After you, your highness," said the Captain.

"You want me to go in _there?" _said an incredulous princess, looking into the pelican`s cargo bay.

"Yeah, I came here by _your _means of transportation first. Now it`s _my _turn."

"Well," said Celestia before stepping into the aircraft. "I suppose it`s only fair."

8. Chapter 7: Q and A

****Chapter 7: Q and A****

****August 5, 2558****

****0927 hours (five minutes earlier)****

****Ponyville****

****The Golden Oaks Library****

The marines of Fireteam Icebreaker were standing around inside the library, answering Twilight Sparkle`s various questions while she wrote down their responses on a levitating sheet of paper with a levitating quill.

"So, how many colonies does humanity own?" asked the lavender alicorn, jotting down the last response. "And as a follow-up question, on which colony were each of you born on?"

"My, my," said Corporal Marcus Williams. "For a princess, you are _quite_ curious."

"And apparently you like to read," said Private Eugene Phillips, seemingly mesmerized by all the shelves of books in the room. "A _lot."_

"Thank you both for stating the obvious," said Sergeant Alex Thompson sarcastically.

"As of now, I believe the UNSC owns well over a hundred colony worlds," said Gunnery Sergeant David Alvarez. "Ironically, none of _us _were born on a colony. We were all born on our home world, called Earth. Alex, Eugene, and I were all born in a country called the United States of America, USA, or US for short. Jenkins was born in a country just north of the US, called Canada. Marcus over there was born in a country called England."

"And I was born in Australia," said Private Oscar Morgan. "`s why all my mates call me Sidney."

"Yeah, uh, the capital of Australia is called Sydney," gunny explained. "Since it can also be a name, we thought that it'd only be fitting to call him that."

"Which leads me to my next question," said Twilight. "Why did you all give each other such peculiar nicknames in the first place?"

"It`s partially because we`ve become such good friends with each other, brothers almost," said gunny. "I'm sure _your_ friends have given _you_ at least one nickname."

Twilight thought about this and realized that her friends _had_ _given_ her, as well as each other, nicknames.

"Yeah, my friends sometimes call me Twi," said Twilight.

"See? That`s what I mean," said gunny. "Although, I'm pretty sure it`s mostly because when we`re in combat, a short nickname can help us call on each other quickly."

"Combat, huh? Interesting," said Twilight as she scribbled more notes on her paper. "Very interesting."

_"I _have a question," said Spike who, up until now, had been completely silent. "How do we know that we can _trust_ you?"

"My _god," _said Alex. "Does _everything _on this planet speak English?"

"You mean Equestrian," said Spike.

"Oh, whatever you call it."

Suddenly, David brought his hand up to his helmet communicator.

"Yes sirâ€|" he said as he stepped away from the group and began pacing the floor. All eyes were silently fixated on him. "â€|You mean her tree?... Then yeah, we`re still here, sirâ€|Yes sir, I'll tell them, sirâ€|Yes sir, I'll ask her, sirâ€|Yes sirâ€|Aye, aye, sir."

"Who was it?" asked Private First Class Ogden Jenkins.

"The Captain," gunny answered. "He`s on his way here with the other princess. Turns out, the artifacts are here in this tre- er, I mean, _house, _and Twilight here knows where they`re at."

"Artifacts?" said Twilight.

"Yeah, he said to ask you where they are and what they look like."

"Oh! You must be talking about the Elements of Harmony."

"Elements of Harmony?" said gunny.

"Yeah, they`re right over there."

Twilight pointed a hoof across the room to a glass case containing five necklaces and a tiara. They were all seemingly made out of gold and each had its own unique symbol.

"*whistle*Damn," said Private Eugene Phillips as he walked over to them. "How much did these babies cost?"

He began to reach out to touch the glass casing before gunny added, "And, Shifty, Captain Laskey also made it very clear to _not _touch the artifacts until he arrives with the princess. Am I clear?"

"Yessir," said Shifty, quickly pulling his hand away and sheepishly placing it behind his head.

"Good."

Suddenly, a frantic knocking was heard at the door.

"That might be the Captain," said Jenkins as he began walking up to the door. "I'll get it."

However, as the Private First Class opened the scarlet red, wooden door, the sight that greeted him was not that of the _Infinity`s _Captain, but of the stunned faces of five more ponies.

The cyan one with rainbow-colored mane suddenly tackled him onto his back.

"I've got the alien!" she exclaimed as she pinned Ogden to the floor with her hooves on his forearms. "Get Twilight and go!"

Suddenly, Ogden quickly wrestled his right arm free, grabbed the hoof that held his left, lifted it, grabbed it with both hands, went under Rainbow`s armpit as he stood up on a knee, and forced Rainbow to the floor on her face, thus subduing her. He placed his left knee on her back for good measure.

"Rainbow, they`re not here to hurt us!" said Twilight.

"Oh, yeah? Well then how do you explain this?!" said Rainbow, referring to the awkward position that Ogden now held her in.

"Jenkins, stand down," said gunny as he walked up to them and the other ponies that were filing in.

"Yes sir," said the PFC, letting go of R.D.

As she stood back up, he said to her, "Sorry, but you really can't expect me to not react to an assault like that."

"Yeah, wellâ€|you just got lucky!" said an irritated Rainbow before trotting back over to her friends.

Then the orange-colored pony wearing a cowboy hat approached Ogden.

"Don' mind her," she said. "She just don't 'preciate bein' embarrassed is all."

"I didn't want to embarrass her," said Ogden. "I was just focused on subduing her."

"You think she'll see it the same way? Wha don' you talk to her abut it later?"

Jenkins looked over at Rainbow Dash with a look of sorrow.

_I hope the Captain doesn't make me too busy, _he thought. There were so many things he had done in his past that he wasn't forgiven for, but this was the first time in a while that he wanted forgiveness. He couldn't tell what it was, but there was something about this ponyâ€|

Suddenly, a familiar humming could be heard outside the library, followed by a knock at the door.

"Now that must be the Captain," said gunny as he, once again, walked up to the door.

Upon opening the door he saw the Captain with the alicorn princess at his side.

"Sir," said gunny, saluting his commanding officer before ushering them both in.

As Laskey walked inside gunny announced, "Marines! Captain on deck!"

All the marines of Fireteam Icebreaker saluted to their ship commander.

"At ease," said Laskey.

When gunny had lowered his arm, he gave the princess a nod, "Your highness."

"Alvarez?" said Laskey.

"Yes sir!" said David.

"Have you located the artifacts?"

"Right over there, sir," said gunny, pointing to the glass case across the room. "Twilight called them the 'Elements of Harmony' sir."

"Elements of Harmony?" said Laskey as he approached the six golden pieces of apparel.

"Yes," said Celestia. "This is why we need your help, for within these artifacts lies the magical power to fix any problem too big to be solved on our own, such as unimaginable chaos, great evil, and even war."

"If it can solve war," said Laskey. "Then why do you need our help?"

"They can only do these things if close enough to the threat. I have considered this to be far too dangerous considering the Changeling's ranged weaponry, technology that has never been seen before on this planet."

The Captain thought for a moment before asking, "How are the Elements used exactly?"

"They are worn and powered by the living embodiments of the Elements themselves," said the Alicorn Princess before gesturing with a hoof to the other six ponies in the room. "Which, as luck may have it, are the mares standing right before you."

"Soâ€¦do you want us to escort them to an area close enough to the changelings so that they can use the Elements?"

"No."

"No?"

"It's too risky. I have already seen what they have done to my own troops. If just one of the projectiles makes contact with bare skin, it will incinerate anypony down to their bare bones."

"Wow, sounds like not even a Spartan escort would be enough."

"Precisely. This is why we need humanity to fight the war that the changelings wanted Equestria to fight."

"So you're using us as cannon fodder?"

"I completely understand if you feel that this is mistreatment, and I wish that there was another way, but if you don't, humanity will lose it's only chance of achieving harmony."

"And I also suppose that FLEETCOM wouldn't be too happy about me allowing the destruction of not one, but six forerunner artifacts."

"Exactly. So, either way, I really don't think you have a choice."

Laskey thought for a moment before saying, "You saw that humanity has faced this same genocidal threat before in the past, the only difference here is that you can't defend yourself."

He then looked the Sun Princess in the eye, "Your species doesn't deserve that fate."

9. Chapter 8: The Crisis at Hoof

****Chapter 8: The Crisis at Hand/Hoof****

****August 5, 2558****

****2200 hours****

****Canterlot****

****The Royal Castle Throne Room****

Nighttime in Canterlot, and Pinkie Pie had finally gotten around to throwing a party for the interstellar visitors; the lights of which were bright enough to render the stars of Luna's night invisible. The party was raging in Canterlot Square, humans and ponies alike dancing, drinking cider, and even taking turns singing on the erected stage.

Their leaders, however, were in the palace overlooking the festivities, discussing what should be done about the coming threat.

_ "Two _countries in a day?!" exclaimed Celestia.

"I am afraid so my sister," said Luna solemnly. "Canida has fallen to the changeling army."

"Damn," said Lasky. "So it's possible that their armies are superior _and _that their opponents are behind in technology. Either way, I have no intel; if you two know anything about their troops, like how they operate, what weapons they're using, how many of them there are, etc, tell me now."

"Well theyâ€|actually, how about we just show you?" said Celestia. "Luna? Would you please?"

Luna then proceeded to show Lasky the same recording sent to her by the Equestrian soldier when Boardor fell.

After the recording had finished, there was, once again, a familiar stunned silence; this time, however, it was broken by the only human in the room.

"They have a vendetta against you," Lasky stated flatly. "Why?"

Both princesses proceeded to tell the story of the changeling attack on Canterlot. Lasky quietly listened to it. When it was over, the Captain's first spoken thought was a question.

"So, you were barely able to hold them off even when they were using their bare hooves?" asked Thomas.

"Along with weaker, but still somewhat effective, magic from their horns, yes," confirmed Celestia.

"And from what we saw from that soldier's recording, I'd bet that they've found a way to amplify that magic with those spears. If we could only get our hands on one of them, then I'm sure that _Infinity_ Science would be able to figure something out for us.

"Also, I'm pretty sure that their main advantage is their ability to spy. That's what made you so vulnerable that day, the fact that they could magically disguise themselves and look exactly like anypony they choose; that is, any_pony, _not any_thing, _meaning that they can't disguise themselves as one of us humans. Speaking of which, what is stopping them from spying on us right now?"

"There is no way," said Luna. "Not only was every changeling in Equestria driven out of Equestria when Shining Armor and Cadence used their magic of love to scatter them, but now the shield has been modified so that it is now invisible, encompasses all of Equestria, and will not allow any changeling to pass through whether they are disguised or not."

"And when exactly was that shield put up?" said Lasky. "What if a few changelings managed to get within your borders before it was?"

"It was put up the moment the spell was cast that day," said Celestia. "Thankfully, though, with the assistance of Cadence's magic, Captain Armor no longer needs to think about nor replenish the shield. However, we fear that the changelings' new weapon will allow them to break through."

"Okay, but I still think that security should be increased around here," said Lasky. "I think the best option would be to have a few of our SPARTAN-IV fireteams replace your royal guard."

"Why? Haven't we just established that there are presently no changelings in Equestria?"

"Celestia, wouldn't you agree that humanity's lack of trust can sometimes be its greatest asset?"

"I, guess so."

"Then you understand why I wouldn't trust our established enemy to stay out when potentially getting in could potentially give them every advantage?"

"You just said the word potentially twice; aren't you inadvertently saying that the odds of this are very slim?"

"Yes, but you're missing the point here, I'm saying that even though the odds of a changeling being put here are slim, aren't the profits of doing so too great for them to not risk it?"

"Well, I suppose you do have a valid point there," said Celestia. "So, what should we do about it?"

"Well the first thing we should do is get all royalty in one place, this palace looks like our best option as of now. If any royalty is too far from here, then, with your permission, we'll use human transport to get them here, because if changelings can only disguise themselves as other ponies, then we can't risk using any royal guards for exfil; now it's nothing personal, it's just a precaution."

"Very well, you have my authorization."

"Good, now if you'd be so kind as to tell me where any royalty that isn't in Canterlot is so that we can go get them?"

Putting a hoof to her chin, Celestia said, "Let me see, along with Luna and I, Shining Armor is here in this palace as well; Princess Cadence is over in the crystal empire; and Princess Twilight Sparkle is down at the party."

"I'll send a Pelican to pick up Cadence," said Lasky. "Maybe Captain Armor should go there with the transport; that way she'll know that we can be trusted."

"Good idea, I will send for him," said the princess of the night as she walked towards the throne room's exit.

"Got it," said the Ship Captain to the departing alicorn before returning his attention to the other. "And as for Twilight, I'll get Fireteam Icebreaker to escort her inside."

Captain Lasky and Princess Celestia then went out onto and looked over the throne room's balcony to observe the party once again.

"Although," Lasky started. "They do seem to be having a good time down thereâ€¦"

Suddenly, multiple humans came on stage and their lead singer announced, "This next song is dedicated to why we humans will fight for you wonderful ponies. Hit it Vinyl!"

Thomas and Celestia were surprised by this, and curiosity got the better of them.

"Okay," said the ship commander. "I'll contact them after this one."

Nobody here knocking at my door
>The sound of silence I can't take anymore
Nobody ringing my telephone now
>Oh how I miss such a beautiful sound

And I don't even know how I survive
>I won't make it to the shore without your light
>No I don't even know if I'm alive
>Oh, oh, oh without you now
>This is what it feels like

Nothing to hold but the memories and frames
>Oh they remind me of the battle I face
>without your love, without you I drown
>Somebody save me I'm going down

And I don't even know how I survive
>I won't make it to the shore without your light
>No I don't even know if I'm alive
>Oh, oh, oh without you now
>This is what it feels like

And I don't even know how I survive
>I won't make it down the road with one headlight
>No I don't even know if I'm alive
>Oh, oh, oh without you now
>This is what it feels like

As the song ended, and the mixed crowd of humans and ponies erupted into their thunderous applause, the Captain found himself momentarily shocked at the amount of preparation that must have been done within a single day to put on such a show. But then he remembered that many

of the marines and naval crewman were, in some form or another, very artistically inclined. Also, that Vinyl Scratch character really seemed to have a way with modern-sounding music.

"Umm, Captain?" said Celestia as she placed a hoof on Lasky's shoulder, interrupting his thoughts. "Weren't you going to contact your men?"

Suddenly, thoughts of the crisis at hand re-flooded Lasky's mind, and he remembered what he supposed to do after the song.

"Oh yeah, right" he said as he brought his wrist communicator to his mouth. "Gunnery Sergeant David Alvarez? Do you read?"

** . . . **

August 5, 2558

2231 hours

Canterlot Square

The thing about apple cider is that it's basically pony's alcohol; therefore, the harder it is, the more it hurts their tongues and the drunker they become. For humans however, the sensation is much more different; for them it's just sweet, like drinking a non-carbonated bottle of soda.

Therefore, the bartender at the party's bar, as well as anypony at or around the bar, was impressed (to say the least) when all six of the marines of Fireteam Icebreaker each began to chug down a full bottle of the hardest cider that the bartender could give out (it was what the bartender said was so hard, that he was only allowed to mix it with other drinks and not give it out by itself).

Everypony continued to watch in awe as the six humans finished their bottles in synchronous, at which point they and every being around them, whether a pony or a human, gave out enthusiastic cheers and then proceeded to continue partying to Vinyl's looping tune.

This was one of the biggest and brightest parties that the marines of Gypsy Company had been to in a long time. There was rarely any partying aboard the ship, so they were determined to make the best of it. So, Fireteam Icebreaker decided to scatter after their little show of cider to meet some ponies and other marines.

However, there was one marine out of the six who's main goal that night was to meet (and apologize to) just one, particular young pegasus with rainbow-colored mane.

_You'd think that with hair like that, _thought PFC Ogden Jenkins.
She'd be easier to pick out in this crowd.

As he wandered through said crowd with another bottle of cider, he concluded that it must be the various colors reflecting off of the magically floating disco ball and bathing the square in rainbow-colored light that must be making it so hard. It was at this point that the young soldier wished that he had found out her name earlier so he could at least try calling out to her through the noise of the music and partygoers.

He finally struck luck when he reached the edge of the crowd and saw her sitting at a table talking to her purple princess alicorn friend, Twilight Sparkle. As he approached, he could hear them gossiping about somepony who was apparently named "Flash Sentry."

Setting his bottle on the table, he said, "So, some party, eh?" as he thumbed at the fray behind him. As he sat down with them, he took off his helmet and placed it on the table as well, revealing his short, black hair. Looking to the rainbow-maned pegasus in front of him, he said, "Look I'm sorry if I hurt you or made you feel humiliated today. I was only doing what I was ordered to, attack if attacked, or subdue, in that case."

"Oh, it's alright," said the cyan mare with a smile, much to the marine's surprise.

"Wow," said Jenkins. "That wasâ€¦fast."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't know, it-it's just the way you looked as I left Twilight's tree-house; I mean it must've been the look in your eyes or something, I just didn't think you'd be this quick to forgive me."

"Oh, please, I don't hold grudges; especially not after that song one of you just sung, apparently you're going to fight the changelings for us? Anyway, I still want a good rematch!"

"Pff, bring it!" said Ogden jokingly, throwing up his arms in challenge before waving it off. "Not now though, we don't want to crash this party now do we?"

The three shared a quick laugh, glad that there were no more hard feelings.

"By the way," started Jenkins as he pointed a finger at the cyan pegasus. "I never got your name."

"I'm Rainbow Dash!" said Rainbow Dash as she struck a proud pose. "Fastest flyer in all of Equestria!"

"Ogden Jenkins, Private First Class of the UNSC marine corps," said Jenkins, holding out his hand for a handshake. "Pleasure to meet you miss Dash."

Dash stared at the hand awkwardly for a few seconds before holding up a hoof for Ogden to see. Ogden realized what she was trying to get across and made his hand into a fist. They both chuckled as they fist/hoof-bumped.

Twilight however, remained silent, deep in thought as she observed Ogden's fist change back into a hand, seemingly in slow motion, as he retracted the gloved appendage back to himself.

_Where have I seen that before? _she thought to herself.

A sudden tap on her shoulder ripped her from her thoughts.

"Princess Twilight?!" called a voice from behind her.

The purple alicorn turned to see the leader of the six humans that had come to her house earlier that day.

"Oh hi!" said Twilight, having to now shout over the music as Vinyl raised the volume. "Mr. David Alvarez isn't it?!"

"Yeah! That`s me!" said gunny with a smile. "Listen, uh, my Captain has just ordered me to take my squad and escort you back to the castle!"

"Why?!"

"I dunno! He just said that it was for security reasons and that he`d brief us when we got there!" gunny then pointed at the PFC. "Jenkins! Call `em in!"

"Aye, aye, sir! Let`s hope they still have their helmets on!" said Jenkins as he put on his and adjusted the helmet mike. "Icebreaker, Icebreaker, this is Jenkins!"

As he was saying this, he spotted Sgt. Alex Thompson in the crowd. He was standing next to Private Oscar Morgan while talking with the cowgirl pony with an orange coat and blond mane named Applejack while the private was speaking with a pegasus pony with a yellow coat and pink mane named Fluttershy. Since Alex had his helmet on, he heard the incoming transmission. He began to look around and quickly spotted Jenkins and gunny at the table.

The PFC beckoned him over with his arm as he continued, "Fall in on gunny`s position over!"

Ogden then observed as Alex tapped on Sidney`s shoulder and told him to follow him. They then quickly said their goodbyes and jogged over to the table. Corporal Marcus Williams and Private Eugene Phillips soon joined them as well.

"What`s going on?" asked the Corporal.

"We need to escort Princess Twilight to the castle," said gunny. "Captain`s orders."

"Aw man!" complained Eugene. "I hate to have to leave such an awesome party so soon."

"Yeah come on, gunny," said Alex. "It`s the first party he`s ever been to!"

"What?! No it isn't!"

"Then quit complaining!"

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Come on, marines," said gunny. "Let`s load up and get this done."

"Aye, aye, sir!" said the rest of the marines in unison.

They then proceeded to walk toward the castle. At the edge of the party/concert area there was an exit leading towards the castle; just outside of it, Fireteam Icebreaker found the ammo dump where every marine at the party had dropped their gear, weapons, and, well, ammo.

Any marine in the squad that didn't have on a helmet grabbed one. They then proceeded to each take and load a M6H handgun and then take a combat knife and place it in the knife sleeves on their shoulders.

There were a few other marines guarding the dump who struck up a conversation as Icebreaker began to leave it.

"Leaving so soon?" one of them joked. "Where`re you headed?"

"The Castle," said gunny. "Captain wants her up there but had to call for some protection. Don't worry, though, we`ll be back."

"Alright, see ya round!"

"See ya."

As they walked away from the party, two mares were still in it, sitting at another table, watching them leave from a distance. Their names were Lyra and Bon Bon.

Except, they weren't Lyra and Bon Bon.

"They`re leaving!" said "Bon Bon".

"I have an idea," said "Lyra" before getting out of her chair. "Follow me."

They both walked into a nearby alleyway where they changed into their true form, two changeling soldiers.

As they walked past a dumpster, they could hear the muffled screams of the real Lyra and Bon Bon coming from it.

"Sir," whispered the changeling that had recently been disguised as Bon Bon. "They`re awake!"

"Don't worry," whispered back the other, higher ranking changeling. "Once you`ve tied up, gagged, and blindfolded a pony, they just can never seem to find a way out!"

"Combine that with putting them in a place where nopony will think to look and they`re doomed!"

"Right you are. Another reason why changelings are superior!"

"Heh heh, yes sir!"

The two continued to quietly giggle manically as they exited on the other side of the alleyway, the sounds of the party now sounding much more distant though only behind one building.

"So, what`s your plan?" asked the subordinate. "And what will we do about these, _humans, _that have come to help the infernal

ponies?"

"Don't worry about the humans, whatever they are, for we have already managed to topple the countries of two other species today! We'll just kill them like the rest. As for my planâ€¦"

The changeling then shape-shifted into one of Celestia's royal guards, armor and everything.

****Disclaimer:****** The song sung in this chapter is ****_**This is What It Feels Like *_****by Armin van Buuren and the looping song that Vinyl Scratch was playing is called ****_**Beyond the Night *_****by Loopmasters + VJ Loops Remix. Look them up. I do not own anything!******

10. Chapter 9: A Slight Change in Plans

****Chapter 9: A Slight Change in Plans****

****August 5, 2558****

****2300 hours****

****Canterlot****

Fireteam Icebreaker was now about halfway to the Royal Castle; they had formed a makeshift "convoy" in which each man was about three meters apart from each other in a hexagonal defensive perimeter around the princess, and up until this point, everyone in the group had yet to say a single word. The only sounds heard were the sounds of footsteps and hoofsteps combined with the evermore distant sounds of music from the party. The only pony in the group was the one to break the silence.

"So," said Princess Twilight Sparkle, trying to strike up a conversation. "How was the party? Did any of you get to meet anyone?"

Finding themselves bored as well, due to a lack of something to keep their minds occupied, the six-man group around the alicorn decided to grant her request for a discussion.

"Oh, yeah," said Private Oscar Morgan. "I got to talk to that pegasus named Fluttershy. Strange how her name seems to match her personality, 'cause I'll tell you mate, in all that noise, it was a miracle that I was even able to hear her name when she told it to me. I don't think I've ever met anyone as soft-spoken as her."

"Well there's Fluttershy for you," said Twilight with a chuckle.

"Yeah, but I don't care, I like her. She seems really kind and caring. I don't see why anyone wouldn't be friends with someone like her. How 'bout you, Shifty? Who'd you meet?"

"I got to meet the one who orchestrated the entire party," said Private Eugene Phillips. "That silly pink mare ironically named Pinkie Pie. I like her too, but I just don't get her sometimes. She's very naïve, she seems to have a thing for saying entire speeches in

one breath, and then she starts defying the laws of physics. One moment she's here, another moment she's over there, then she's suddenly right behind me! And then there's the fact that she always bounces around everywhere; she never seems to run out of energy."

"Oh that Pinkie Pie," said Twilight. "She is quite eccentric."

"Yeah, but strangely, it's that eccentricity that I really like about her."

"Hah! No wonder you could never find a woman back home," teased Sergeant Alex Thompson.

"Oh yeah, sarge?" challenged Shifty playfully. "Who'd you meet then? Huh?"

"I got to meet that Applejack character. Seems that she grew up on a farm like I did, still works there too. She also really seems to like food, mostly anything apple based. I swear, if she wasn't selling all those apple pies at her stand, she'd be stuffing her face with 'em! Also, I don't know where she went to school, but she had some pretty broken English-er Equestrian, if that's what you prefer to call it. Jenkins? I believe you met that Rainbow-haired pegasus for the second time today? You were sitting at the same table she was at when you called us over. She still mad about what happened?"

"No actually," said Jenkins. "She said she was fine and that she doesn't hold grudges, which I find kind of weird, given how boastful she is by nature. The first thing she said about herself to me was a proud claim that she's the fastest flyer in Equestria. Seriously though, where's the proof there?"

"You'll believe it when you see it," said Twilight.

"Oh sure," said Jenkins sarcastically. "Ooh! She should totally race one of our F-41s!"

"A Broadsword? Please," said Corporal Marcus Williams. "That's the fastest multipurpose strike fighter ever created by the Misriah Armory. It'd leave her in the dust."

"Well, if she's as fast as she claims to be, then she'll at least keep up with it. By the way Corporal, did you meet anyone tonight?"

"Yes actually, tonight I met the acquaintance of miss Rarity. She's a fashion designer at Ponyville's Carousel Boutique, reminds me of my mother."

"Your mother was a fashion designer?!" teased the Sergeant once again. "How'd _you_ end up the military?"

"Oh, I don't know Sergeant," said Marcus indignantly. "Maybe the only planet humanity had left was under siege by an alien alliance that wanted nothing more than to see us burn?!"

"Okay, okay! Calm down, I know," said a now serious Alex as he looked at the ground. "I'm sorry I said that. That's why we all joined, and

became ODSs.

"Then why'd you stay?" asked Gunnery Sergeant David Alvarez who, up until now, had been completely silent. "After the war had ended, you could have all gone home to your families; instead you stuck around, signed up to work on the _Infinity _as marines. Why?"

"Well, I had had friends before the war," started Jenkins. "But when I joined the ODSs, got assigned to this squad, and dropped into our first mission, we became so close that, I realized that none of my friends back home were _true_ friends like you guys. I mean if they saw me drowning and were under fire at the same time, they would've run away to save their own asses, but you saved me. I just couldn't leave you guys. I mean, I love my family and all, but I also found that there was no other paying job that I was good at than being a soldier."

"You know what?" said Corporal Williams. "I think that's why we all stayed."

The rest of the marines spoke out in agreement.

"Well, your friendship seemed to have started in a, _strange _way," said Twilight. "But I hope this bond lasts as long as possible."

"Thank you, Twilight," said gunny.

Before they knew it, they had arrived at their destination. Canterlot castle loomed overhead. In front of the main doorway stood two royal guards.

"We'll take it from here humans," said the one on the left.

"Alright," said Alvarez as he stopped to let the alicorn princess trot past him. "We'll see you tomorrow Twilight. It was nice meeting you!"

"You too," said Twilight as she walked between the two guards. "See ya!"

The guards then proceeded to turn around and follow the princess close behind. Gunnery Sergeant Alvarez and his team then turned around and began their journey back to the party.

They had no idea of what was currently happening inside.

. . .

As Twilight trotted through Canterlot Castle, flanked by her two guards, she couldn't help but think about the humans' peculiar story of how their friendship was started. She also found it hard to believe that the five men of that Fireteam under the command of that Alvarez soldier had, seemingly by coincidence, individually met each of her five friends.

_Humans are so strange, _she thought. _Yet so interesting. Ugh, there's my inner scientist coming out again. But there's something else, I feel like I've seen their species befo-_

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted when she entered the throne room, for the sight that greeted her left her too stunned to think, or move.

** . . . **

August 5, 2558

2250 hours (20 minutes earlier)

Canterlot

The Royal Castle

Princess Luna had just entered the main castle barracks and was about to call out for Shining Armor before two guards stopped her.

"Captain Armor is needed at once," ordered Luna.

"Of course, your highness," said the guard on the right. "Right this way."

Luna followed the guards for about five minutes before reaching Shining Armor's private quarters.

The princess of the moon wasted no time.

"Captain Armor!" called Luna before knocking on the door. "It is Luna! You are needed fo-"

She stopped mid-sentence as the door creaked open in response to her knocks.

"Shini-? *_gasp!*_ " said Luna as she opened the door fully to reveal a gagged Captain of the Royal Guard, with a magic-restraining ring on his horn, struggling with sticky, green goo that restrained his forehooves.

This was the last thing Luna saw before the royal guard behind her knocked her unconscious with the blunt end of his spear.

As the princess of the night fell face-first onto the floor, the two guards materialized into the true forms of the changelings they were.

"Good hit sir," said one. "Why's this happening now?"

"I dunno," responded the other. "Ten minutes ago, the commander telepathically ordered me to do this. You can ask him when he gets here with the purple one."

Shining Armor froze at the mentioning of his little sister, but all he could do was give both changelings an angry stare that failed to faze either of them.

"Yes sir. So, what about these two?"

"Commander's orders are to get all Equestrian Royalty tied up in the

throne room. So get the princess here restrained with goo and put a ring on her horn while I carry the Captain over there."

"Yes sir."

** . . . **

August 5, 2558

2210 hours (one hour earlier)

Northern Equestria

The Crystal Empire

The Crystal Palace Throne Room

"Your majesty," said a high ranking crystal guard. "An urgent message from Canterlot. Your presence is needed in the Capital."

"Why?" asked Princess Cadence with much concern in her voice. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm afraid so princess. From what I hear, the changelings have returned."

"Oh dear!" said Cadence, remembering her encounter with their queen. "Then it must be a security issue."

"Yes indeed, we've already prepared a chariot for you. Follow me."

She got off her throne and followed the crystal guard out of the throne room into the adjacent hallway. The hallway then led to a set of doors that opened to a large balcony revealing a chariot with two guards in front of it.

She walked up to the chariot's side door, but when she reached to open it, there were suddenly three flashes of bright green light behind her.

Cadence froze. When she turned around, she saw that she was no longer flanked by three crystal guards, but by three changeling soldiers. They each pulled out a foot-long black rod that mechanically extended into their spears.

"Alright princess," said the changeling in the center. "Turn around, open that chariot's door, then get on your knees in front of it."

Terrified and seeing no way out, as the three changelings could impale her if she tried to make a break for it _and_ that they would be immune to her magic because they wielded their own, she unwittingly did so.

Once on her knees, facing the inside of her chariot with her hooves behind her head, the center changeling that had spoken to her collapsed his spear back into a foot-long black rod, attached it onto his back, walked up to the now surrendering pink alicorn, and spat a sticky, green goo out of his mouth and onto both of her front

hooves.

"Ugh," said Cadence, in disgust for the goo, as the changeling placed both her hooves behind her back and glued them both together with more of the green, gooey adhesive.

The changeling then glued her wings together (Cadence mentally facehooffing having not even thought to use them) before he finally placed the magic-restraining ring on her horn and stripped her of her crown.

A hoof placed on the back of her head was the last thing Cadence felt before her face was shoved into the chariot's floor-fabric.

** . . . **

August 5, 2558

2310 hours

Canterlot

The Royal Castle Throne Room

In front of Twilight lay the sight of all Equestrian royalty on their knees, their forehooves glued behind their backs with some sticky, green goo and magic-restraining rings on their horns.

Before she could react, she was grabbed from behind and shoved to the ground by one of her royal guards.

"Twily! Nooo!" cried her older brother, who could only watch helplessly as the guard materialized into the changeling he was and restrained her hooves and wings with goo.

The other guard that was behind Twilight shape-shifted into the changelings' squad leader.

"Where is the human?!" he demanded as he walked up to the changelings standing by the sun princess.

"We don't know commander," one of them responded. "When we jumped Celestia, he was standing right next to her; but then when we had her on the ground, he was nowhere to be seen."

"Gaaahh!" exclaimed the squad leader in frustration. "What will I ever do with you bums?!"

In desperation, Twilight's horn began to glow as she tried using her magic to do something, _anything, _before yelping as the changeling soldier standing over shoved her head, face-first, onto the scarlet-colored floor carpet.

Her horn still glowing, the changeling said, "Don't you dare! If you do anything with your magic, we'll randomly vaporize one of your royal friends!"

The glow of Twilight's horn faded, and the shape-shifter placed a ring on it.

"Good girl," he said before lifting her to her knees, tears streaming down her face.

"I'm sorry princess," she sobbed.

"It`s okay Twilight," said Celestia, sympathizing with the lavender alicorn, even though they both knew it wasn't okay.

All the while, Captain Lasky was in fact hiding right behind the throne itself. He concealed himself there when he and the princess were ambushed. He mentally thanked fate that these changelings weren't bright enough to search the room for him. Lasky was outnumbered, and out gunned; the changelings were ten soldiers strong, and wielding spears that could incinerate anything in the room, while all he had on his person was his M6H, which he now had armed in his right hand.

He needed backup, and _fast._

He brought his wrist communicator to his mouth and whispered, "Fireteam Icebreaker! Come in Icebreaker!"

** . . . **

August 5, 2558

2312 hours

Canterlot

Halfway Between the Castle and the Party

"_Fireteam Icebreaker! Come in Icebreaker!_"

"Captain?" said Alvarez. "Is that you? And why are you whispering?"

"_The changelings have infiltrated the city and have all Equestrian Royalty at gunpoint in the throne room! Get over here now! I'll contact Spartan Palmer to send additional support, hurry!_"

The Gunnery Sergeant looked to his men and asked if they all got that message via their own helmet mikes. When they all nodded their heads, all six men immediately turned around and began their sprint back towards the Castle.

** . . . **

Meanwhile, back in the throne room, the situation was deteriorating quickly.

"Sir? Why are we doing this now?" asked one of the changeling soldiers. "I thought we were supposed to wait until the main forces got closer."

"Well, I've decided to change the plan," the commander responded. "By killing off all Equestrian leaders, we'll throw Equestria into complete anarchy! By the time the main forces get here, Equestria will be in complete chaos, and takeover will be a breeze."

"We'll be heroes!" exclaimed the insubordinate.

"Precisely! The changeling empire will idolize us for its victory!" said the commander as he walked up to Celestia and placed the tip of his spear on her nose. "And now, such fame is but seconds away."

__**BANG!**__

A bullet hit the commander right between the eyes; his head snapped back as green blood splattered onto the changelings behind him.

All at once, things went into slow-motion as his stunned comrades and their royal hostages watched as his body fell to the ground; Princess Celestia looked behind her to see that Lasky had broken his cover from behind the throne, the barrel of his weapon smoking.

Both Cadence and Twilight squealed in absolute shock as the doors of the throne room opened to reveal Fireteam Icebreaker with their M6Hs drawn level, PFC Ogden spearheading their breach.

"Targets front! Targets front!" he barked.

When Jenkins spoke, the changeling insubordinate that the commander had been talking to immediately spun to face the human with his spear; in response, the PFC shot him in the face without hesitation.

Each man in the Fireteam managed to headshot one changeling in the room (gunny managed to kill the one holding Twilight) before three Spartan IVs burst through the stained glass window right next to Twilight.

It seemed as if the changeling soldiers were done for, when something completely unexpected happened.

As the Spartans landed around Twilight, they were all hit by the fiery projectiles fired from the changelings' spears. When their shots made contact with their shields, they began to glow bright green.

Then, all at once, all three Spartans vaporized into thin air, their weapons clattering to the floor.

While every pony and live changeling had expected this, every human was utterly dumbfounded.

While they were stunned, the changelings then pointed their spears at the marines and fired.

But this time, to everyone's surprise, when the marines were hit in their abdomens, their armor actually absorbed the projectiles and then blew them off their feet a few meters back. The breath may have been knocked out of them, but they were still alive.

When Alvarez became the only marine left standing, he immediately shook himself out of his trance and went to work.

"What the fuck is going on?!" he yelled as he and Lasky shot the final three changelings to death.

****Author`s Note:**** And on that bombshell, I give you chapter 9! Hope you enjoyed my little (gigantic) plot twist!

11. Chapter 10: A Strange Day

****Chapter 10: A Strange Day****

****August 5, 2558****

****2330 hours****

****Canterlot****

****The Royal Castle Throne Room****

"Owwwâ€|" groaned Ogden as he lay dazed on the floor. "What just happened?"

"I dunno Jenkins," said Gunnery Sergeant Alvarez solemnly. "First we land on a planet filled with talking ponies, then find that they need our help, and _now _three Spartan-IVs just got vaporized before our very eyes!"

"B-but, but_*cough*_," stuttered Private Eugene Phillips. "Spartans don't die! I-I thought thatâ€|_*cough*_ _ju-Spartans don't fucking die goddammit!"

"Oh god_*cough*_," said Sergeant Alex Thompson. "Shifty, let`s just get something straight here. Now I know you've grown up to be brainwashed into thinking Spartans are invincible, but here`s the thing: Spartans die. They do, alright?! They aren't completely invulnerable! But they only die _physically. _When people say that 'Spartans don't die,' they mean that their legacy lives on, that they`re never forgotten."

"Oh," Shifty responded nonchalantly. "That makes a _lot _more sense."

"But _how_ this happened remains a mystery," said Captain Lasky as he walked away from the throne towards the Spartans` remains, pointing his pistol at the glowing green ashes. "We need to get _Infinity Science _on this right away. For now, get these ponies untied Icebreaker."

"You mean unglued sir?" said Alvarez.

"Yeah."

Gunny pulled out his combat knife. "Aye, aye, sir," he said.

He walked over to unglue Twilight as the rest of his marines went to unglue the others. All the while Captain Lasky was radioing the _Infinity _to send down Dr. Halsey and Dr. Glassman.

"How?" Twilight nearly whispered as she stared at the body of the dead changeling behind her.

"Excuse me?" said gunny.

"How could you? How can you just effortlessly end a life without thinking?"

"`Cause we've been doing this for a long time sweetheart," said Sergeant Thompson as he cut the green goo binding Celestia's front hooves and began working on freeing her wings. The marines all chuckling in agreement.

"Yeah," said gunny as he got behind Twilight and started cutting her front hooves free. "All our lives we've been shooting at and killing alien life forms. These guys were no different to us."

"What were these things anyway?" asked PFC Jenkins as he finished freeing Cadence and Shining Armor.

"They call them _changelings," _said Lasky.

"Oh! These are the changelings that every pony out there was talking about," said Shifty. "Wait, but how'd _you _know that sir?"

"Private, what did you think I was doing this whole time up here in the Princesses' palace?" the Captain responded. "Don't answer that."

All the humans exchanged whole-hearted laughter, Celestia and Luna both blushing, while Twilight remained silent, deep in scolding thought.

_They just killed _ten _living things, _thought Twilight. _And they're laughing. Laughing as if something so tragic never happened._

She then looked down at the dead and bleeding bodies of the changeling soldiers, the stench of their rotting flesh beginning to surface.

_It's as if they had never lived at all. I know I should be grateful to them for saving my life, but stillâ€¦it just seems wrong; it just doesn't _feel_ right to me that they're acting this way._

She then looked back up to the humans and noticed something.

"Wait!" she said, now relieved of any green goo restraining her limbs. "I remember now! I _have _seen your species before!"

"What?!" said all seven humans in unified response to her claim.

She had, in fact, seen humans before, in her quest to find and take back her crown from Sunset Shimmer.

The lavender alicorn now knew why she hadn't recognized the human species before: they simply looked different. The humans she had encountered at Canterlot High School were young, skinny adolescents, most of them female; on top of that, their skin color varied through virtually every color of the rainbow, their hair more elongated and fashioned. These humans were mostly male adult soldiers covered in combat gear and armor, their hair in crew cuts. They were also more muscular than the Canterlot High teenagers, and _their_ skin color

only varied through black, white, and various shades of brown with the occasional red.

"Uh, marines?" said Lasky. "I think you'd better head back to the party; you've earned it."

"Aye, aye, sir," said gunny. "Come on men. Good work."

"Also, while you're there, spread the word about this. All marines need to be notified right away: _they're_ going to the front lines now, not the Spartans."

"You got it sir."

As they left, Lasky radioed for a pelican from the _Infinity._

"It's already been too long," he said. "Three of my Spartans are dead and FLEETCOM still has yet to be informed of this planet's existence. Also, I'm not sure if I can convince them on my own to let me utilize any military force on this planet."

"So, how do you plan to convince them?" asked Luna.

"Well, I'm going to need all of you with me talking to them as well."

"You want us to go up _there?!" _asked Cadence incredulously.

"I can only radio them from my ship; so yes, you're going up there."

"Oh boy," said Shining Armor. "Here we go."

** . . . **

August 5, 2558

2342 hours

Canterlot Square

As Icebreaker reentered the party, it seemed crystal clear to them that it would continue on well after midnight. The music was still just as loud and the parties were still just as lively as ever before.

The six-man Fireteam broke up once again, and Ogden decided to revisit the table where he thought Rainbow Dash would still be sitting at. When he found that she wasn't there, he resolved to just go and sit at the bar, order a few drinks of cider maybe, for he was far too tired to go looking for her. Fortunately for him, he wouldn't need to, for Rainbow Dash had already beaten him there.

"Hey there," said Ogden as he sat down on the stool next to the one she was sitting on.

"Hey," she responded with but a cursory glance in his direction. "Did Twilight make it safely to the castle? Like I already don't know the answer."

Realizing that she had no idea of what had just happened up there, Jenkins decided to change the subject while putting her mind to ease.

"Oh yeah. Don't worry, she made it," he said back. "Uh, how's the cider?"

"Strong as ever," she responded before taking a sip of her glass, grimacing as she struggled to swallow. "Ugh, how is it so easy for you to just scarf this stuff down?!"

"I dunno. Evolution?" he said as the bartender passed him another bottle of the strong cider.

As he opened the bottle, two male pegasi walked up to the cyan mare from behind. One was covered in a brown coat with a dumbbell cutie mark while the other had a tan coat showcasing a cutie mark of three basketballs.

"Well, well, well, look who we have here," said the brown one.

"Oh Celestia no," groaned Rainbow.

"Flirting with a human Rainbow Crash?" joked the other before they both burst into a bullying laughter.

Rainbow could only hang her head and ears as she let bullies harass her. Meanwhile, Jenkins faced towards the front of the bar, pretending not to listen.

"Hey bartender," he said. "Get me a glass."

As the bartender passed it to him, the brown-coated pegasus trotted up next to him, between him and Rainbow.

"Who is this human anyway?" scoffed the stallion. "Interact with your own kind, _alien."_

Ogden casually poured some of the cider from his bottle into the glass.

"Hey?!" continued the pegasus as he thumped an arm down onto the bar table in front of the marine. "Didn't you hear me? Get off my seat."

The marine then firmly pushed him a few inches back, holding his hand on the stallion's chest and then looking up to his face.

"Hold your horses," Jenkins said. "I'll get up."

"Horse?!" _exclaimed the pegasus as Jenkins began to drink the cider from his glass. "For your information, _alien, _I'm a _pony."_

At the word alien, Jenkins accelerated his drinking and in half a second the cider was gone from the glass. Then at the word pony he stood up and smashed the now empty glass against the brown stallion's temple.

It had all happened in a flash, and now Jenkins stood towering above the once pompous now bleeding and groaning pegasus; his tan-coated

partner having stepped back in shock, the look on his face matched only by that of Rainbow`s (and everypony watching as well).

"Her name," said the PFC slowly. "Is Rainbow _Dash. _And you will _NOT, _speak to either me _or _her in that way do you understand?"

"Okay! Okay!" pleaded the brown one, continuing to hold a hoof to his head as he backed away on the floor and began to stand.

Once he was up, Jenkins got right up into the stallions` face.

"I suggest you show a little more respect next time. We`re here to save your asses, so the least you can do is be a little more grateful! Understand?!"

"Y-yes! Yes! Okay!" stuttered the bleeding stallion.

"Just leave us alone!" said his buddy before they both ran away through the crowd.

As Jenkins sat back down, Rainbow finally managed to shake her trance and speak.

"Wow," she said. "No pony`s ever stood up for me like that. In fact I don't think anypony`s _ever _stood up to those two before!"

She then stared at the drink in her hoof and consumed it like a shot of beer.

Wiping her mouth, and with a drunken smile, she said, "Thank you."

"Yeah," said the bartender. "Though that was kind of violent, I like what you did human. You`re the first I've ever seen stand up to those two."

"Oh don't mention it guys," said Ogden. "I hate bullies, and there were a lot where I grew up."

"You poor thing," Rainbow slurred slightly. "But you know, you're a pretty cool guy, Ogden. I like you."

"Aw, you don't mean that," Jenkins replied, a faint shade of red coming to his cheeks.

"No, I do. You're really cool," Dash reaffirmed, making sure the PFC got it this time.

"Thanks, that means a lot coming from you."

"Of course it does! I`m the coolest pony in Ponyville, after all," the Pegasus boasted once more.

"Yeah, uh, you said that already."

"You know what? Why don't you rest at my place tonight?"

Now recognizing her new demeanor, Ogden turned his head to look straight into her eyes.

"Are you drunk?" he asked.

"Well _yeah," _she responded, well, drunkenly. "Didn't you know this stuff made us tipsy all the time?"

"I should probably walk you home, then. Just in case."

"Hah, you think I _walk _home?" she said as she flared her wings.

"Wait, what? Where`s your house?"

"It`s a cloud-house. Only pegasi like me can get there."

"So, you want me to ride on your back?"

"Uh-huh."

"But you`re drunk."

"So?! There`s nothin` I can run into in th`air, and I ain`t _that_ impaired."

"You`d better hope so, you and me both actually."

"C`mon, it`s gettin` late."

Rainbow hopped off her seat at the bar and began her long trek to the party exit, stumbling drunkenly back and forth as she slowly made her way. Jenkins got off his own stool and walked after her. Once he had caught up he tried to keep her trotting in as much of a straight line as possible. All the while he wondered how non-alcoholic cider could intoxicate any living thing this much.

Once out, Rainbow spread her wings and beckoned for Ogden to climb aboard. Once on, he proceeded to cross himself and then bend down and hug her neck tightly.

"All good back here," he said as he patted her side.

"O-kay, here we go!"

With one, big flap of her powerful wings, she took to the air, flying near mach-1. Ogden had to duck his head down to keep the wind and G-forces from tearing his face off. He kept his helmet on his head with one hand while holding onto the rainbow-maned pegasus with the other.

"Hah HAAA! THIS IS UNREAL!" yelled the young marine happily over the roar of the planet`s atmosphere rushing past his ears as he and the young mare rocketed toward Cloudsdale.

** . . . **

August 5, 2558

2350 hours

The UNSC **_Infinity**_

Aboard the _Infinity, _all Canterlot royalty marveled at all the advanced technology that surrounded them, particularly the young, lavender alicorn, whose scientific origins were putting her in seventh-heaven right now.

"This technology is amazing!" she exclaimed. "And I see how it works now: because you don't have magic, you used electricity instead! However, I find it unbelievable that you could go farther with electricity that we could go with magic."

"Well, you see," said Lasky. "And me and Celestia have been over this, correct me if I'm wrong, but due to relativity, our species has existed longer than yours. Therefore, we had the time to do all this."

"Ah," said Twilight in understanding.

"So you said you've seen humans before. How?"

"Well," started Twilight before speaking of her journey through the mirror.

"Wow. That is just incredible," said Lasky. "But why would there be humans, or at least humanoids, beyond the portal?"

"Beats me," Twilight responded. "It must have been a sign."

"Maybe," said Thomas as they entered through the doors to the bridge.

"Captain on deck!" barked a naval officer before everyone in the room stopped what they were doing to stand up and salute their ship commander. They all then briefly looked strangely at the entering group of equines following their Captain before his signal of "at ease" sat them all back down to continue their work.

"Well here we are," said the Captain to everypony as they walked to the front of the room, where a large window lay between them and the endless vacuum beyond. "This is the bridge, where I command everything that goes on both in and outside the ship."

As he spoke, Roland`s hologram appeared above the turquoise-blue hologram table just behind the group.

"Ah," said Lasky. "Everypony, this is Roland, the ship`s artificial intelligence program, or A.I. for short."

"Pleasure to mee-" he started before giving a confused look. "Wait, sir? Did you just say every_pony?"_

"Well, _yeah," _said Thomas as he gestured to the equines behind him.

"Uhhhhmmmmmmâ€|Oh, _kay? _Pleasure to meet you all," he said, before turning his attention back to Lasky. "Captain, Admiral Osmond from FLEETCOM is on the line."

"Oh really? I was just about to call her myself; I guess it has been too long. Put her through, Roland."

"Yes Captain."

As Lasky turned to the window, straightening his shirt collar, it doubled up into its own TV screen as the symbol of the UNSC appeared in the center. The image then melted away digitally to reveal a woman in her early thirties sitting at a desk in an office of some kind. This was Admiral Osmond, and she was not happy.

"Captain Thomas Lasky!" said Osmond on screen. "I have been trying to reach you foâ€" what the hell are those _things_ behind you?! What have you been keeping from me Captain?!"

"Kind of pushy isn't she?" said Celestia as Twilight hid behind her.

"Oh yes," said Lasky.

"Wait, what? D-did it just speak?" said the surprised Admiral. "And did you just respond to it?!"

"Ma`am, I know this must be coming as quite a shock to you," Lasky responded. "Everything will be explained in due time. I realize that I've kept quiet for a time longer than what was expected of me and kept a lot of information from you, and I apologize for that. But right now I need to explain myself; that`s why you called isn't it?"

"Very well," said Osmond, still clearly in a slight state of shock at the talking creatures on her screen as she shakily sat back in her chair. "The floor is yours, but I'd like you to start by telling me what in the universe these creatures are."

"Yes ma`am, let me introduce you to Princess Celestia, Princess Luna, Princess Cadence and her husband Prince Shining Armor, and Princess Twilight Sparkle," he pointed to each royal equine as he listed their names. "They are all alicorns, except for Shining Armor, he`s a unicorn. They are all the royal monarchs who rule over their country, ironically named Equestria."

"Oh my."

"I know this is a lot to take in ma`am," said Lasky. "But don't worry, it`s been a weird day for all of us."

"Well alright, I guess we`ve all seen our fair share of aliens."

"I agree ma`am."

"But what about the forerunner artifacts? What about the mission?"

"Well, we warped to this planet because the Janus Key identified six forerunner artifacts on it."

"Yes, I was informed of that. I'd like to hear more about them."

"Yes ma`am. They call them the 'Elements of Harmony,' and the good news is that they`ve agreed to share them with us. However, before

they do so, we have to do them a small favor."

"What kind of favor?"

"Princess?" said Lasky as he stepped aside to allow Celestia the floor. "Would you please?"

** . . . **

As Rainbow stumbled towards her bed, Ogden followed close behind, still reeling from his ride up here.

_ "That _was amazing," he exclaimed as he took off his helmet, revealing his black hair. "You _ponies_ are all justâ€|amazing! Really, you are!"

"Thanks," said Rainbow, putting her bedcovers over herself before beckoning for the marine to follow. "C`mon in."

Jenkins immediately started backing away, once again realizing just how drunk the cyan pegasus was.

"Oh no, I can`t," he said.

"Why not?" asked Rainbow playfully.

"Well, I can, but I, just, thought I'd sleep on the floor tonight."

"Oh come on now!" she laughed. "You`re hurting my feelings."

Realizing that she most likely wasn't going to give in, Ogden decided to give her what she wanted.

_ "*sigh*_Okay," he said as he reluctantly walked up to the bed. "If you say so."

** . . . **

Captain Thomas Lasky exited the bridge through its electronic sliding doors with an enthusiastic fist-pump.

"Yes! Score!" he almost shouted. "I now have full military jurisdiction in Equestria, time to do whatever it takes to protect this place from the changelings. Thank you all _so_ much for talking to her; you did great!"

" 'Twas no problem at all," said Luna.

"I'm actually quite surprised that Osmond was so lenient about my losing three of my Spartain IVs," said Lasky. "Maybe what happened on Requiem made this look like a smaller mishap."

"So what`s your plan?" asked Celestia.

"Well, first things first," started Lasky. "Since I can`t use Spartans anymore, I'll have to resort to using only my marines. I'll have Castle Company be on 24/7 guard of Canterlot along with your royal guard, Shadow Company on the front lines 24/7, and Gypsy

Company split half-and-half: part-time guarding Cloudsdale and Ponyville, and part-time on the front lines."

"Sounds like a plan," said Shining Armor.

"But before I send any marines out to fight, they need to be trained."

"Trained? What do you mean?" asked Twilight. "Haven't they already been trained _and _combat experienced?"

"Yes, but they still need to get used to this planet`s gravity. I've noticed that it`s slightly less than our norm and needs a little more getting used to. I'll have my men run a few combat training exercises against each other, so they can get used to fighting under this planet`s conditions."

"But where exactly?"

"Well, before we were ambushed, Celestia and I were talking about what you call the 'Everfree Forest' near Ponyville. Apparently you`re all scared of it because the plants grow all on their own, the animals care for themselves all on their own, and the clouds move, _all on their own."_

"Well yeah, most ponies are going to be scared of that because that`s just not natural around here. In Equestrian borders, excluding the Everfree Forest of course, plants don't grow unless earthponies water them, clouds are moved around by weatherponies, and, at least in Ponyville, Fluttershy has to take care of _all _the animals."

"Wait, so you`re saying that outside of Equestria, things thrive independently as well? Similar to the Everfree Forest?"

"Yes."

"Okay then. Well, here`s the thing. Where humans come from, places like the Everfree Forest _are _natural. The clouds that move on their own water the plants which then grow on their own. Those plants are then eaten by the animals themselves. It`s all its own cycle."

"Wow. You humans really are the warriors we need."

"You said it sister. Also, my men only know how to fight humanoid alien species as well as other humans. They also need to learn how to fight equines, or an _equinoid_ species if you will. From what I've seen, that`s what these changelings are aren't they? Equinoid?"

"You hold a valid point," said Luna. "What are you proposing?"

"Well, these changelings are basically equines with spears aren't they?"

"Correct."

"So I thought, well, aren't your royal guards equines with spears as well?"

"Ah."

"Exactly, so I'd like your permission to allow my marines to train with your royal guards in hand-to-hoof combat, so that I can be sure that if they ever get into close quarters with the changelings, that they'll still be confident enough to take them on."

"Permission granted," said the alicorn princesses of the sun and moon in unison.

** . . . **

August 6, 2558

0050 hours

Canterlot

The Royal Castle Throne Room

Captain Lasky had finally come back down from the ship to see what Infinity Science had come up with regarding the Spartan's greater vulnerability than that of the marines.

By the time he had reached the place, there were already about a dozen scientists in white lab coats analyzing the scene, utilizing all sorts of different gadgets and gizmos, the radiation detection equipment being amongst the many. Dr. Catherine Halsey and Dr. Henry Glassman were among the scientists, both hard at work analyzing the still glowing green ashes of the three super soldiers that once were.

"Sorry for keeping you all up so late," was the first thing to exit Lasky's mouth as he walked in through the throne room's two massive double doors, the princesses trailing behind.

"Oh it's no problem, sir," said Dr. Glassman. "All our internal alarm clocks were screwed up from the start anyway. Although, *yawn* it is pretty dark out."

"Have you reached a verdict?" asked Lasky.

"Yes sir. I think we've figured it out. Care to explain Halsey?"

"Well," started the elderly scientist. "Our radiation equipment seems to have picked up some sort of ambient or radiant energy left over from the attack; I can only guess, as much as I hate to admit it, that this energy is some sort of magic. I'm sure one of the Captain's pony friends can attest to this. Moving on, the Spartans must have been affected by this magic because their energy shields were also a fine source of a similar radiant energy which then mixed well with the changelings' projectiles. This leads me to assume that, since the magic is under the changelings' control and the changelings wanted the Spartans dead, well, let's just say the magic had no choice but to give the changelings what they wanted. The marines however, have no recumbent or ambient energy of the kind that this projectile can affect to cause this Vaporization, because, unlike the Spartans, their armor isn't powered by any energy; it's just plain Kevlar armor with crystal coated and imbedded Titanium. This means that the

marines had armor that not only deflected the magic, but also dispersed the searing heat of the fireball that would have otherwise burnt them to a crisp had the projectile made contact with bare skin. I'm sure that ODSs, with their similar armor, will also have similar resistance."

"This is a lot of useful information Halsey," said Lasky, kneeling down next to the ashes. "Good work team. Why don't you all go get some rest back on the ship? You've earned it."

** . . . **

August 6, 2558

0600 hours

575 miles southwest of Equestrian borders

The Changeling Grand Palace

"My queen," said General Hives as his leader groggily sat up in her bed. "Sorry to wake you so early."

"What is it Hives?" said Chrysalis as she rubbed her eyes. "What could it be that is so important as to interrupt my beauty sleep?"

"We have lost contact with our spies."

"What?! How?!"

"I don't know, your highness, but before they went they gave me information that is all that we'll ever need."

"What?"

"They told me the plan is falling into place. Our approaching troops are serving as the perfect distraction. The foolish equines and their ally have no idea thatâ€"

"Wait," Chrysalis cut off. "What ally?"

"Some alien species my queen. They said that the ponies called them humans, but our spies informed me that they shouldn't be a challenge."

"Very well, continue."

"As I was saying, your majesty, the foolish equines have no idea that they currently have more than one enemy."

12. Chapter 11: Dreams and Nightmares

Chapter 11: Dreams and Nightmares

August 6, 2558

0730 hours

****Canterlot Castle****

****Princess Luna`s Bedroom****

Luna stood on the balcony just outside her private quarters, staring up at the behemoth of a floating vessel that was the UNSC _Infinity_ hovering just above the outskirts of Ponyville.

"What is your story?" she wondered aloud to nopony in particular, before trotting back inside, closing the doors, and finally resting her legs by sitting down on her haunches.

She closed her eyes, and her horn began to glow its shade of sapphire.

**** . . . ****

****October 20, 2552****

****2210 hours****

****Earth****

****Africa****

****Kenya****

****New Mombasa streets****

Upon entering the dream of Gunnery Sergeant David Alvarez, the human that had saved her life, Luna found herself standing in what appeared to be a human city. Apart from the burning buildings in the distance, this section of the city seemed calm and peaceful.

For the most part at least.

Suddenly, a large, blue and purple aircraft emanating an eerie hovering sound flew overhead; a spotlight coming off of it, searching, searching for any signs of human resistance.

At that moment, Luna felt something. She knew this feeling all too well; it was what told her the location of the dreamer every time she entered a dream. But something wasn't right. For some reason she sensed his presence above her.

"That does not make sense," said the midnight blue alicorn to herself. "Humans cannot fly."

She took to the air regardless; quieter than the breeze was her takeoff, all the while looking for Alvarez.

Finally her eyes came to rest on what looked like some kind of pod large enough to fit one human, lodged into the side of one of the buildings. Hovering just beside it with her wings, she peeked inside to discover a human soldier sitting unconscious within. Though he was wearing a helmet with a visor that obscured his entire face, Luna knew that this had to be him.

Suddenly, he began to move. As soon as he did so, Luna instinctively flew to a hovering position just above the pod to avoid being

seen.

Inside, he began to speak.

"Ah fuck," he began. "It`s dark out! I must`ve been knocked unconscious for a few hours."

Though he was inside the pod, Luna could hear every word crystal clear, as this was somepony else`s dream that she had entered, her mind could hear every thought of the dreamer.

"I gotta get outta this thing ASAP," he said before punching four green buttons.

Suddenly, the front end of the pod burst off and clattered to the ground nearly one-hundred feet below. Holstering his silenced M6C sidearm and grabbing his silenced M7 submachine gun, he jumped out. Seconds later he landed with an audible _thud _and yelp of pain.

Concerned for him, Luna quietly descended to aching human, activating an invisibility spell on her way down.

"Ooowwwwâ€|" he groaned before looking around; his eyes finally landing on a pair of medpacks on the other side of the street. "Medpacksâ€|gotta fix myself up quick."

He stumbled over to them, grunting against the pain the entire agonizing way. Once there, he picked one of them up, the machine beginning an automated advertisement as he did so.

"Fast, accurate diagnosis," It said in its computer-like voice. "Or your money back."

"ONI covered up the majority of my identity and faked the rest for this shit?" said David to no one in particular, seeming to ignore the machine as he treated himself back to health. "Somehow I was born on Luna now, Earth`s moon instead of Earth itself for god`s sake!"

_They call their moon Luna? _Thought Luna. _Interesting._

"And apparently my name`s John Doe now," said the ODST, now finished healing himself. "Man, I gotta stop complaining; I gotta focus. My squad`s out there somewhere. Hell, they could all be dead, but I still gotta try."

He raised his weapon and began to move.

"And something tells me that there`s more to this mission," he said as he moved into the night. "I hope we weren't just desperate measuresâ€|"

Luna looked on until Alvarez had disappeared into the darkness of the city streets, then she deactivated her invisibility spell. She looked on for another moment at the burning city in the distance before activating her horn and disappearing herself as she left David`s dream to enter another.

** . . . **

****April 27, 2526****

****0034 hours****

****Circinius IV****

****3 miles outside of Corbulo Academy of Military Science****

It was nighttime again, but this time Luna found herself in the middle of a woodland area that reminded her of the Everfree Forest. She was in a clearing, standing next to some concrete structure. Off in the distance, she heard the roar of some creature followed closely by a distant green light.

Suddenly, she heard voices and saw flashlights coming ever closer at an alarmingly fast rate. She instinctively activated her invisibility spell once again just as four young humans burst into the clearing. They were wearing armor similar to the marines that were currently in Equestria.

The midnight blue alicorn once again felt the presence of the dreamer, this time right in front of her.

One of them had been helping another to walk and was setting him down underneath the structure. Luna walked up to the wounded human and the one kneeling next to him. Upon closer inspection as he pulled his helmet off she found that the wounded one was actually female. She was coughing violently and seemed to be in a lot of pain.

"We're gunna get you outta here okay?" said the young soldier beside her.

"April! Stun rounds," said the only other male in the group.

The one named April did as she was told; she got the stun rounds and broke them in half as she walked back to her wounded comrade.

"This will numb the pain," said April as she poured out the contents of the bullet onto the wounds of her friend. It only seemed to make it worse as the wounded one flinched in agony.

"Hang in there Chyler, c'mon hang in there," said the male soldier beside the one named Chyler.

After a few moments of the two looking almost lovingly into each other's eyes, the male reached out to her neck and pulled off a metal object of some kind that looked something like a necklace.

He began to shake his head violently as if he refused to believe something, as if he refused to believe what was happening.

"It's okay, Tom," said Chyler.

Realizing who it was next to her, holding her necklace object, tearing up, and shaking his head violently, Luna's eyes began to tear up as well as she pieced together what was happening.

"I'm sorry," she croaked.

The young Thomas Lasky barely managed to whisper back his desperate response, "No, please."

A few moments later, Chyler Silva gave her last breath and grew still.

She was gone.

"Oh Chyler," sobbed Lasky.

Luna could barely take it anymore, as she was on the verge of tears herself. Knowing that sobbing could give away her position, she covered her mouth and quietly mourned.

Suddenly, Lasky screamed to the heavens, "Chiiiiiiiiiiiiiiyleeeeeeeeeeeeeerrr!"

And then the world around them collapsed.

** . . . **

August 6, 2558

0800 hours

UNSC **_Infinity**_

The Captain`s Quarters

Nearly five miles above Equestria, Captain Thomas Lasky woke with a start and sat upright in his bed. He was in a cold sweat and breathing hard from his memories of that fateful night.

Once he had regained his composure, he moved to the side of his bed and turned on the room lights with a small remote. The resulting light illuminated the once dark room, but just barely. He had set the lights to a dim setting, only enough light to allow him to see his hands. Using said hands, he wiped the sweat off his face and forehead before reaching over to his bedside compartment.

Unlocking it and reaching in, he pulled out a pair of dog tags with Chyler Silva`s name on them.

For the first time in years, a tear ran down his cheek.

"I don't know how I ended up in this situation," he said. "But this just got more personal than I ever thought possible. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I can't let these ponies down."

**Author`s Note: **This chapter was a request from Brotherbeam. Sorry about this being incredibly short again. I promise the next one will be as long as the previous one. Hope you enjoyed it!

13. Chapter 12: Training Day (Part 1)

**Chapter 12: Training Day (Part 1)
>

August 6, 2558

****0823 hours****

****Cloudsdale****

****Rainbow Dash`s cloud-house****

Rainbow Dash awoke to the headache of a hangover. She sat up dizzily and put her head in her hooves.

"Ahhhâ€¦" she groaned. "Too much cider. Maybe if I get up, walk arou-

She froze, for as she moved to exit off her mattress, she felt the slightest tug on her abdomen. Somepony`s hoof was there, but who`s hoof? She lifted the blankets.

It wasn't a hoof.

It was the arm of some unknown creature with five more little appendages coming off the end of it.

She looked behind her and saw the face of the alien that was holding her.

It began to move.

In shock, she gave a small squeal as she fell off her bed, wings flapping uncontrollably. The alien awoke to her squeal and the sound of her hitting the floor.

Rainbow backed away a little as the extraterrestrial sat up in her bed. It wore some sort of armor, had black mane, and had tan-colored skin. They made eye contact, and instantly the events of the previous day flooded back into their minds.

"That wasn't a dream?!" the human exclaimed.

"I wasn't dreaming?" asked Rainbow as though she hadn't heard the human in front of her.

"Oh my god."

"Oh my Celestia."

They made eye contact once more, and Private First Class Ogden Jenkins got off the bed and slowly walked over to the cyan mare. He knelt down to her, and after a few more seconds of looking into her large, magenta eyes, he reached out and gently put a hand on her cheek.

Rainbow shut her eyes and softly gasped at his touch.

"Easy," said Jenkins soothingly. "I not gunna hurt you."

He then put his other hand behind her head and brought her in for a hug.

"Sorry for startling you," he said.

"S`okay," Rainbow responded as she returned the embrace. "I wasn't scared though."

"Sure you weren't," said the PFC sarcastically.

"I wasn't!"

"Are you kidding? You should've seen the look on your face! It was hilarious!"

The two began laughing jovially as they let go of each other, glad to have their disquieting morning encounter with each other behind them.

"By the way," started the cyan pegasus, her headache now having been startled out of her. "About that rematch."

Before the marine could react, she grabbed him by his arms, flew him over onto the bed, and started tickling his neck.

"Ahahahaha-quit it! HeheHAhaha!"

"Oh? Are humans the ticklish kind?" said Rainbow as she continued her torture.

"Hahahokay, alright, that's it! Game on!" said Jenkins before he quickly turned the tables on his cyan tormenter by grabbing the front of her neck and using his legs to flip the two of them over.

Now Jenkins was on top of her.

"Rainbow, you're about to learn one of the many things that fingers can be useful for. This one being that they're good for TICKLING!"

The marine began his torture by attacking her neck, just as she had attacked his.

"Gahahahahaha! Oh Celestehahaha! Stop Stahahap PLEASE!"

"Who`s the ticklish one now?" boasted the PFC as he moved one hand down to her belly.

"No NO nahat there! Anywhere but there!" said the cyan pegasus as she as she rolled over onto her face.

Rainbow was having a wonderful time, despite what she was saying (and the fact that she was losing).

"Do you surrender?" asked Jenkins.

"Never!" shouted Rainbow into her bedcovers.

The human then went for her armpits.

"GAAhahahahokay! Okay! I give, I GIHIHIVE!"

Only then did Jenkins finally stop. He got off of her and lay down next to her. Rainbow brought her face out of her bed covers and laid her cheek on them, now smiling playfully at the human next to her as

she audibly breathed in and out, trying to catch her breath. Jenkins smiled back as he felt her breath on his face. He reached over and stroked her rainbow mane.

"You know," started Jenkins. "You're the only one of your kind that I've seen with this rainbow-colored hair."

"It's called mane," said Rainbow. "And rainbow-mane is extremely rare."

"I could imagine. Who were your parents?"

"Oh they both had rainbow-colored mane too," she said. "It runs in the family, and I really don't know where it started. I feel it's been something that's made my family really unique."

"Sounds like somepony had a happy childhood," said Jenkins. "Can't say the same for myself though."

"Why not? Didn't you have nice parents?"

"Not really."

"Did you even _know _your parents?" said Dash in sarcastic disbelief.

"Unfortunately yes."

"What d`ya mean?"

"Well, just my father mostly. You see, my mom died giving birth to me."

"_*gasp*_"

"I know, and as a result it was pretty rough growing up, as you could probably imagine."

"Why? Didn't he try to take care of you?"

"Oh absolutely, it's just that, he was a bit of a jerk. Okay, a lot a bit."

_ "What?"_

"It must have been the death of his wife that had gotten him so naturally riled up. I'm pretty sure he blamed me for her passing, and he wasn't gunna blame himself. By the time I'd turned 17 I had grown so _sick _of the guy that I couldn't have been happier when I was forced to enlist into the UNSC."

"Why were you forced?"

"Obviously because of my fatherâ€¦|partially. 'Why don't _you_ join with me?!' I asked," Jenkins made a grumpy face, and in a gruff, old man's voice said, "'Cause I'm too old!' he responded. 'Ya know there's an age limit! And you're just old enough to sign up!'"

Rainbow giggled slightly at his impression.

The marine returned to his normal voice, "'Well I was going to enlist anyway! `Cause guess what?' I said. _'I'm_ too old for your shit!' and I ran out the door."

"Wow. You were pretty rebellious."

"As if you weren't; I can tell."

"But what was the big rush?_ Why_ was there so much urgency to join?"

"Because the Covenant had reached Earth, my homeworld, and people everywhere were enlisting to defend it."

"Ah, so you _had_ to do it, huh?"

"Yep."

The sat in silence for another minute.

"So about your rainbow mane again," said Ogden. "You said it was rare?"

"Oh yeah," Dash responded. "I said it`s one of the things that make me feel special."

"As if you weren't already," flirted Jenkins. "You know I've also noticed how your ears twitch as they pick up sounds. I think that`s really cute."

"Thanks," said the cyan pegasus as she wrapped her hooves around the PFC`s arm, closing the gap between her and her new, interstellar friend.

"Rainbow, I wanna thank you for your hospitality. We may not have a whole lot in common, but you`re real nice for letting me stay anyway."

"No problem," said Dash, snuggling a little closer. "No problem at all."

The two stared at the ceiling in silence for another minute, until a crackle from Jenkins` helmet radio sitting on the nightstand disturbed the stillness.

"â€|Jenkins, come inâ€|"

"Sorry," said the marine as he got off the bed. "I gotta get that."

"What is it?" asked Rainbow.

"It`s my squad," the human responded as he put the helmet on. "They`re probably wondering where I am."

"Oh."

"â€|Come on marine, answer meâ€|"

Jenkins knew that voice, he'd heard it through helmet microphones long enough to identify it anytime he heard it.

"Go Sergeant."

"â€|Goddammit marine! You gave us a scareâ€|"

"Aww, did you actually miss me Sarge?"

"â€|Shut up Jenkins, and tell us where the hell you areâ€|"

"Is gunny there?"

"â€|Yeah, and reading you loud and clearâ€|Where are ya?"

"Ummâ€|Hold on," he turned to the cyan mare. "Rainbow, what'd you call this place again?"

"Cloudsdale."

"I'm in a floating cloud city called Cloudsdale, sir. One of the equines was kind enough to show it to me."

"â€|Ya mean that flying one with the Rainbow-colored hair? Looks like you made things up with her after allâ€|"

"â€|Shifty, get off the lineâ€|"

"â€|Aye sirâ€|"

"â€|You too, Sidneyâ€|"

"â€|Aww, c`mon mateâ€|"

"â€|Sid-ney!..."

"â€|Aye sirâ€|"

"Sounds like you're all together. I assume the Corporal's there too?"

"â€|Oh damn, you got meâ€|"

"Where are you guys, gunny?"

"â€|In a pelican, now heading for this cloud city you're in. We've been looking for you all morning! Since 0600 actuallyâ€|"

"What for?"

"â€|We're heading to Ponyville to train with the Princess` royal guardâ€|"

"What? Why?"

"â€|Hell if I know. All I do know is that we've gotta head back to the Infinity and change out of these Hazop Uniforms and into our regular infantry uniforms before heading to the training areaâ€|"

"Understood sir."

"â€|And Jenkins?..."

"Yes, sir?"

"â€|What were you doing with that pegasus?..."

"Oh, um, well, I uhâ€|ahem, what I mean to say isâ€|"

"â€|Out with it Jenkins! It`s awkward already, so you might as well say itâ€|"

"I slept with her, sir."

Laughter erupted on the other end.

"Okay, I know what you`re thinking, and in my defenseâ€|"

"â€|Jenkins, I don't want to knowâ€|"

"â€|Looks like they made up a little more than I thought!..."

"â€|Shifty? Remember when I told you to stay off the line?..."

"â€|Yeah?â€|"

"â€|Well consider that a standing orderâ€|"

"â€|Aye sirâ€|"

"Well, looks like _someone`s _pissed this morning."

"â€|Please, who doesn't get a little cranky in the morning? I'll just be happy once you're on board. I want your things together by the time we arriveâ€|"

"Aye sir."

Turning off his microphone, Jenkins turned around to face Rainbow.

"Hey Dash? I'm gunna have to leave sooâ€|" Now realizing that the cyan mare was nowhere to be seen, "Dash?"

"In here!" she called from a closet at the end of the room.

"I gotta go soon. My guys are coming to pick me up."

"Really?" said Rainbow as she came out wearing a blue and yellow colored suit with a pair of goggles strapped to her forehead. "I gotta leave too. How about that?"

"Whoa, where are you going?"

"To Wonderbolt practice."

"Wonderbolt?"

"The Wonderbolts are only the greatest flyers in all of Equestria," said Rainbow as she trotted up to Jenkins. "And I recently became one of their Captains!"

"Wow, congrats! You must be quite the athlete."

The sound of a pelican's engines came, coming ever closer.

"Oh! Sorry, wish I could stay and chat but," he leaned down and kissed her on the nose. "Gotta go!"

Dash brought a hoof up to the spot on her nose where Jenkins had just kissed her moments before, watching him as he jogged to the door and leaped into the pelican. As the aircraft pulled away, the marine turned back and gave her a quick, two-fingered salute in her direction. When it had left, Rainbow finally realized that she had been blushing. She gave a sassy smile to herself before flying outside.

** . . . **

August 6, 2558

0830 hours

Aboard Pelican Delta 337

Five miles outside of Ponyville

Fireteam Icebreaker was strapped in their seats inside their pelican transport, now changed into their regular infantry uniforms. Gunnery Sergeant David Alvarez, Sergeant Alex Thompson, and Corporal Marcus Williams wore the white chest-plates, shoulder pads, leggings, and helmets worn by all Noncommissioned Officers, while Private Oscar Morgan and Private Eugene Phillips bore the grey, green, and tan uniforms of regular infantry. Only PFC Ogden Jenkins stood out among his comrades; he wore a large radio on his back, used for contacting fire support teams in the area, along with grey helmet with a white stripe going down the middle of it. He was the first to break the all encompassing silence that had befallen the inside of the pelican.

"So you guys all slept on the Infinity last night?" asked Jenkins.

"Nah, we were just giving you a hard time," said Corporal Marcus Williams. "Truth is, we all slept with somepony."

"Really?"

"Well, all of us except for gunny. He actually was on the Infinity."

"Okay, so let's go down the line here. Who'd each of you sleep with?"

"The one named Rarity invited me into her boutique in Ponyville," said Corporal Williams.

"Fluttershy brought me to her cottage," said Sidney.

"Pinkie Pie, god that name is _way _too cheesy," said Shifty. "She took me to her home in this bakery called, I think it was 'Sugar Cube Corner?' Yeah, that was it."

"And the orange one named Applejack took me over to her farmhouse over at 'Sweet Apple Acres,'" said Sergeant Alex Thompson. "Was nice to be back on a farm again."

"So what were you picking on me for Sarge?" asked Jenkins. "You basically did the same thing I did."

"Yeah I know, I know. Like we said, we were just givin` you a hard time is all. I mean, they were all so drunk! How does non-alcoholic cider make anything so intoxicated?"

"I know right?" said Jenkins before his whole Fireteam joined him in buoyant laughter.

"So the reason gunny`s so pissed is because he had to spend all morning flying this pelican around to pick us all up," whispered Shifty to Jenkins, as they were strapped in right next to each other. "Also, I think he might have had another dream last night about that drop he made six years ago."

"New Mombasa?" Jenkins whispered back.

"That`s the one. I'm starting to think that memories like those keep him up at night."

"How do you think he made it outta there?"

Just then, the two marines suddenly became aware that gunny had heard almost every word. He was strapped in the seat across from them. They looked at him, glanced back at each other for a moment, and then looked back at his face again.

"In a captured phantom," he said, answering Jenkins` question. "Made it out just before a Covenant assault cruiser glassed the whole damn coastal highway."

Jenkins and Shifty looked back at each other, and then decided to just shrug it off and continue looking straight ahead.

"We`re here," came the pilot`s voice over the helmet radios as the pelican`s ramp began to come down.

The sight that greeted them was a large, hilly landscape covered in bright green grass. In the distance ran a modestly large river, Ponyville looming just beyond. In the sky rose Celestia`s bright, yellow sun and, seeming only mere inches away, one could just make out the cluster of clouds known as Cloudsdale. As the pelican touched down, the sight of Gypsy Company, as well as an equally large force of Royal Guardsponies lay before the marines.

As Fireteam Icebreaker dismounted from their pelican, along with a

few other fireteams from other pelicans, Gypsy Company Commander Captain Robert Peterson arrived in the passenger seat of a Warthog, which stopped near the edge of the congregation. The Captain Stood up on his seat and faced his marines. From his elevated position, he began his briefing.

"Alright men! Listen Up!" he began in his authoritative voice. "Castle and Shadow Companies are currently training up in Canterlot. Castle has been assigned 24/7 guard duty of the Capital, while Shadow will be on the front line 24/7. As for us, we've been split half-and-half. Only half of our company will be out fighting at a time, the time of which we are not sure of just yet. During this time, the other half will be guarding both Ponyville and Cloudsdale. After today's training, you will find out which platoons will be assigned guard duty, and which will be shipping out, understood?"

"AYE SIR!"

"Good. Now I suppose you're wondering why you need this training. The reason, is that Captain Lasky wants to make sure that we are comfortable fighting what is known as an Equinoid species, or horse-like species, in what is now about to be known as hand-to-hoof combat. These royal guardsmeâ€"er guardsponies, are here to instruct you on how to handle yourself the event that a changeling catches you without a weapon or with just your knife. Listen to what they say, and we can all come out of this a little more confident in our abilities."

"AYE SIR!"

"Alright, now you'll be doing hand-to-hoof combat training until 1300 hours. At that time," he pointed to the woodland area to the north. "You'll all need to head over to the Everfree forest. Once there, all platoon commanders are to meet me at the tree line for a briefing on the field training exercise that we are going to do there. Everyone understand?"

"AYE SIR!"

"Good. Now get to it marines!" said Captain Peterson before sitting back down in his seat.

"AYE SIR!"

The Warthog then sped off toward the Everfree forest tree line.

"Alright Alpha Platoon!" called Lieutenant Daniel Dietz, who was standing about one-hundred feet away next to a royal guard officer, and an entire platoon of royal guardspony subordinates right behind the two of them. "Fall in around us!"

Alpha gathered in front of the group as Bravo through Delta Platoons did the same in front of other royal guard platoons throughout the field. Lieutenant Dietz was wearing his officer's cap and had his M6D holstered on his hip.

"Men, today marks the first and last day of your hand-to-hoof combat training," said the young LT. "So pay attention and learn

well."

"AYE SIR!"

** . . . **

August 6, 2558

1254 hours

Outskirts of Ponyville

Hand-to-Hoof Combat Training Grounds

"Man!" said Jenkins as he took a moment to catch his breath, beads of sweat visibly rolling down his face. "Hard to believe we've been doing this for almost four and a half hours, huh?"

"You think you've got this down?" said his unicorn trainer.

"Yeah."

"Good, 'cause here comes your final test."

Noticing that the unicorn was looking past him, Jenkins looked over his shoulder to see a royal guard sergeant and the Lieutenant Dietz walking over to them. The LT held in his hands a digital clipboard to check off the progress of his marines; due to the look on his face, it seemed that all was going well.

"How's his progress Corporal?" said the Sergeant.

"Oh it's great, sir," said the Corporal. "I have to say, you humans are really fast learners!"

"Good," said the LT. "'Cause the Captain wants us over by the Everfree Forest inâ€" checking his digital wristwatch, "â€"literally five minutes! So let's get this examination through with quickly."

"Alright," started the sergeant. "Here's what we're going to do. In the next five minutes, you will have to perform for us six different takedowns; two with your knife, two with your gun, and two with you bare hands. Got it?"

"Yes sir," said Jenkins.

"Let's start with bare hands," said the Lieutenant.

"Aye, sir."

"Okay," started the sergeant. "He tries to buck you in the chest, how do you react?!"

Ogden's royal guard trainer immediately spun one-eighty degrees and let his two hind legs loose, but the PFC had already sidestepped to the right, following up by swiping the unicorn's two front hooves out from under him.

"That`s one," said the royal guard sergeant. "Now if he comes at you with his spear?"

The downed guard got back on his hooves and grabbed his spear that was off to the side and got in a ready stance. He then thrust it forward at Ogden`s chest, but the human had sidestepped again, this time to the left. He moved forward past the spearhead and grabbed the unicorn`s horn and pulled it forward, off-balancing the royal guard. Immediately after, Jenkins used his right leg to trip the unicorn onto the ground and on his back. The marine held him there with a hand clasping his horn to the ground and his right knee on the royal guard`s chest-plate, his left hand raised in a fist, ready to strike if the subdued pony made any sudden move to escape.

It had all happened within mere seconds.

"And that`s two," said the LT. "Well done Private. Now take out your knife. It`s time for your two knife takedowns."

"Wait," said the sergeant. "What`s that?"

Everyone looked to where the sergeant was pointing, which was at Jenkins` hand, currently grasping the unicorn`s horn. The corporal was apparently trying to cast some magic spell, but Ogden`s hand appeared to be blocking the magical flow through the horn.

"Whoa," said the LT, who then began to take a quick video of the phenomenon with his digital clipboard. "Now that`s interesting. Let me just save that real quickâ€|there! I'll send that to the Captain later, see if he can get Infinity Science on that. Now pull out your knife Private."

"Aye, sir," said the PFC, standing up and pulling his combat knife out of its shoulder harness.

"Okay," said the sergeant. "He tries whacking you with his spear."

The royal guard corporal swung his weapon from the right, but Jenkins caught it with his arm before it struck his head. He then quickly pulled on the spear, pulling its royal guard handler with it, as he brought the handle-end of his knife on the spot where the corporal`s heart would be, due to safety reasons, and thereby avoiding any fatal puncture of the royal guard`s hide.

"Good, very good," said the sergeant. "I like you humans; you`re fast, agile, and sharp. Personally, I don't think the changelings stand a chance."

"Assuming they even get the chance to stand," said the LT.

"Hah! Good one."

"Okay private, on to your next one."

"Aye sir."

The guard then came at Jenkins, attempting to stab him in the chest with the spear. Jenkins, with his free left hand, deflected the oncoming spearhead to the right while his opponent`s momentum

continued to force the unfortunate guard forward. Jenkins sidestepped to the left and stopped the royal guard in his tracks by placing the blunt end of the knife blade on his foe's neck, covering his throat.

"And that's a kill," said Lieutenant Dietz. "Good work, now with a gun. First, your pistol."

"What do you do in a situation where a changeling is trying to choke you from behind?" said the royal guard sergeant.

Jenkins and his trainer got into position; the royal guard corporal wrapped his two front hooves around the marine's neck. Because hooves can't grip each other very easily, it was almost effortless for Jenkins to pull them apart, thus releasing the guard's grip on his neck. Ogden then sidestepped to the left and then put his right leg as far between the guard's two legs and elbowed the equine to the ground. The marine then pulled his M6D out of its holster as he turned to face his downed opponent. With the royal guard corporal on his back and Jenkins now pointing his pistol at him, the first of Jenkins' two gun-takedowns was complete.

"Okay private," said the LT. "Well done. Now get your rifle and do one more."

Jenkins then helped the corporal to his feet before picking up his MA5D assault rifle.

"Now, in this situation," said LT Dietz. "You're in close quarters, and just as you're about to round a corner, he grabs your rifle and starts trying to wrestle it out of your hands. What do you do?"

Jenkins then raised his rifle, and then his royal guard trainer came in from his right and grabbed the barrel of the weapon with his two bare hooves. The marine then elbowed the unicorn across the face with his right arm, grabbed his horn yet again with his right hand, and pulled it straight down, thus tripping the equine over the human's leg and flipping him over onto his back. Jenkins then stepped away from his downed adversary while pointing his rifle at him.

His test was over.

"Well done soldier!" praised Lieutenant Dietz. "You got him off of your weapon, subdued on the ground, and got back to your tool. You made space for your weapon so you could shoot him."

"Thank you sir," said Jenkins.

"That technique of making space for your weapon," said the royal guard sergeant. "Is actually more effective than any other martial arts technique I've ever seen. It's just so fast and simple."

"Yeah, well centuries upon centuries of warfare will teach you a thing or two," said the LT.

"I can see that."

The LT then regarded his digital wristwatch once again.

"Right on time," he said before shouting to everyone. "Time! Time! Time! Fall in men! Time to start heading over to the forest!"

"AYE SIR!"

"Alright, let`s move."

Jenkins, the royal guard sergeant and corporal, and Lieutenant Dietz then began their march towards the Everfree Forest.

"Jenkins, go form up with your squad," said the LT. "We`re going to jog over to the forest. Spread the word that we`re going to be singing the UNSC marine corps cadence."

"Aye sir," said the PFC as he turned and headed back toward the congregation of humans and ponies following close behind.

"And you two," said Dietz, referring to the guardsmen grunts before him. "You guys should probably head back to your royal guard regiment as well."

"You got it," said the sergeant. "C`mon corporal."

"Yessir," said the subordinate, following his superior back to their formation like a terrier follows his master.

14. Chapter 13: Training Day (Part 2)

****Author`s Note:****** Hello my faithful readers! Just a reminder that the map I gave you at the beginning of this story will come in handy for this chapter. Hope you enjoy it!******

**** . . . ****

****Chapter 13: Training Day (Part 2)****

****August 6, 2558****

****1305 hours****

****Everfree Forest Tree line****

****Field Combat Training Grounds****

A pair of F-41 strike fighters soared overhead, heading back towards a distant Cloudsdale on their now daily patrols of the skies above Equestria.

Below stood Captain Robert Peterson, Gypsy Company Commander, and his enlisted tech expert whom sat in a chair in front of an array of big monitors that had just been turned on.

"Alright Corporal," said Captain Peterson. "Are the screens set and ready to go?"

"Yes sir," said the Corporal, not glancing away from the screens. "All we`ll have to do now is connect each participating marine`s helmet cameras to a monitor before starting the field exercise."

"Looks like we`re all set up then. Good work."

"Sir," came a voice from behind. "The Captain is here with the princesses."

Captain Peterson turned around to see Captain Lasky with Princess Celestia and Princess Twilight approaching his makeshift outpost.

"Captain Peterson," started Lasky as both he and Robert Saluted each other. "Is everything ready?"

"Yes sir," said the Marine Captain. "All we need now are the marines themselves to arrive."

"One early morning `bout zero-five!" came a few voices off in the distance.

"ONE EARLY MORNING `BOUT ZERO-FIVE!" came the sound of almost two hundred more.

"Speak of the devil!" said the Marine Captain as all of Gypsy Company began jogging into earshot, singing the rest of the UNSC Marine Corps cadence.

_The ground will rumble, there'll be lightning in the sky!

>_Helljumper helljumper where`ve ya been?!"_

_Feet first into hell and back again!

>When I die please bury me deep!
Place an __MA5__ down by my feet!

>Don't cry for me, don't shed no tear!
Just pack my box with PT gear!_

_Don't you worry, don't come undone!

>It's just my ghost on a PT run!
_

By the end of the verse, the company had arrived at their destination. All four lieutenants then gathered by their Captains.

"Your men are quite disciplined," said Celestia.

"Princess," said Captain Peterson. "May I ask where your sister is?"

"In Canterlot," she replied.

"She`s overlooking the fortification of the City and the training of Castle Company," said Lasky. "Focusing now on what we`re here for, now that the marines are here I believe we should get our field training exercise underway?"

"Yes sir," said Captain Peterson as he began to walk towards a small, gridded holo-table near the big TV monitors. "If you would all follow me please."

On the holo-table there projected a 3-D holographic map of the

Everfree Forest. As the two Captains and two princesses approached it, so too did the four lieutenants from the group of marines that had just marched over.

"Gentlemen," said Peterson once everyone had gathered around the table. He pointed a finger at the map. "Today you will be conducting a field training exercise here in the Everfree Forest. Before I continue, Captain? Is there anything you'd like to say before I debrief them on the details?"

"Yes," said Lasky. "The point of this exercise, plain and simple, is to get you and your men used to fighting with this planet's slightly-less-than-you're-used-to gravity as well as warm you all up for the war you are to fight ahead. This forest is very similar to an environment you'd find on any of our worlds, as well as simulate what the rest of this planet is like. Captain Peterson, you may continue."

"Yes sir," said the marine Captain as he began pointing out different spots on the map. "You will be divided into two teams: Alpha and Bravo will be the blue team, Charlie and Delta will be red team. You and your men will each receive removable Velcro stripes of your respective team color that can be put on all of your helmets."

He pointed to the northern end of the map at a river that split the forest in two. This was the same river that Ponyville was built next to.

"Red team will start here," he said. "On the eastern side of that river."

He then pointed to the southern end of the map at the same river.

"Blue team is to start there, on the southern bank of that river. You will be using non-lethal sim-munition rounds in your weapons to ensure safety. Anyone who is hit is to lie down on their backs where they stood. Any questions?"

"Sir?" asked LT Daniel Dietz. "What areas are off limits?"

"Lieutenant, once I send the message to your holo-pads to start the exercise, every location on this map will be up for grabs. The only places you aren't allowed to go until this is over are any place not on this map. Make sense?"

"Yes sir," he said as he and the other platoon commanders began to eye the old, medieval-style castle at the northern end of the forest.

"Any other questions?" asked Captain Peterson.

The four lieutenants shook their heads.

"Alright, get to it then. We begin at 1500."

"Aye sir," said the four in unison before jogging back to their respective platoons.

"Hold on a second," said Twilight, who had been silent up until now. "So you humans are about to fightâ€¦each other?"

"Oh yes Twilight," said Lasky. "I should mention, you`ll finally get to see what a human battle looks like."

"But why would you ever fight yourselves? It just seems wrong."

"Well, we _have_ _fought_ each other in our past numerous times for multitudes of reasons. All I know is that it`s _the_ reason we`ve become so powerful as a species, because we mastered warfare, by using it on each other."

As if Twilight didn't seem dumbfounded enough by what she had just heard, Celestia leaned in and spoke into her ear something even more shocking.

"As a matter of fact twilight," she whispered. "Humans have been fighting wars with each other longer than ponies of this era have been in existence."

"Oh my," was all the lavender alicorn could say.

** . . . **

August 6, 2558

1495 hours

Everfree Forest

Field Combat Training Grounds

Alpha platoon was crouched, motionless among the trees. Among them was Fireteam Icebreaker, the platoon`s six-man, scout-sniper squad. The squad sniper was Corporal Marcus Williams, he held his sniper rifle in his hands and his M6D sidearm on his hip. The assistant squad sniper was also the team leader, Gunnery Sergeant David Alvarez, who held a BR85HB SR battle rifle in his hands with an M45D tactical shotgun on his back. PFC Ogden Jenkins was the squad radio man; he held an MA5D assault rifle in his hands with an M6D on his hip as well. Sergeant Alex Thompson, the squad`s light machine gunner, held his M739 squad automatic weapon in his arms and an M395 designated marksman rifle on his back. Private Eugene Phillips and Private Oscar Morgan both had an M395 DMR in their hands and an M6D pistol on each of their hips.

A couple hundred meters away crouched Bravo platoon. Just a few meters to their north ran the river they were told to start next to. The sound of its rushing water was calming and serene. The marines all now wore blue stripes going down the middle of their helmets. Between them stood their two commanders, who also wore helmets with the same appearance, looking down at a holographic map on one of their holo-pads. They were putting the finishing touches on their plan.

"So, let`s review the plan," said LT Dennis Ackerson of Bravo platoon, pointing at the castle to the north. "Your men will capture and secure this abandoned castle while we follow this river to the

center of the forest."

"Then, when the enemy attacks the castle," said LT Daniel Dietz of Alpha platoon. "You can move in from behind and hit their flank."

"Sounds like a plan," said Dennis before shaking Daniel's hand. "Let's get back to our guys."

"Alright, let's do this," said Daniel before they parted ways.

As Dietz approached Fireteam Icebreaker, Gunnery Sergeant David Alvarez saw his Lieutenant approaching and stood up to walk over and greet him.

"So what's the plan, sir?" he asked.

"Bravo's going to move northeast along this river," started the LT. "We are going to cross it and head north to this castle."

He pointed to the castle's location on the holo-pad.

"But before we make the clearing, around here," he pointed to a spot about half a mile away from the castle. "I need you and your squad to scout ahead and stop at the clearing. Once there, you are to recon and survey the castle and the surrounding clearing. Radio back to us if you see any enemies in or around the objective, okay?"

"Aye sir," said gunny as he turned to head back to his squad.

"And Sergeant?" said the LT.

Gunny turned back around.

"Yes sir?" he said.

"I understand that you and your squad used to be ODSs," said Dietz. "I just want you to know that that's why I chose you for this task."

"I understand, sir."

At that moment, LT Dietz's holo-pad vibrated, signaling that it had just received a message.

It read one simple word:

****BEGIN****

Dietz, upon reading this, looked up to see Bravo moving forward.

"Okay men," he said, pulling out his M6D pistol. "Let's move!"

**** . . . ****

****August 6, 2558****

****1501 hours****

****Everfree Forest Tree line****

****Field Combat Training Grounds****

"Okay," said Captain Peterson as he observed the holo-table. "The exercise has begun."

Soldiers on the map were shown as either red or blue dots, for red and blue teams respectively. It had been only a minute since the marine Captain had sent his message to begin the combat and already he and his ship Captain, along with the two princesses that were present, could see the dots moving out.

"Now this battle may take a while," said Peterson. "A lot of times they go well on into the night."

"So I hope you two can stay long," said Lasky.

"Oh, we should be fine," said Celestia.

"Yeah," said Twilight. "Number one, I've spent many sleepless nights studying before, so a long night shouldn't be anything I can't handle; and number two, if anything urgent does come up, either Celestia or I can teleport to wherever we need to be and back in a jiffy."

"Hey!" came a shout from a few hundred feet away in the general direction of Ponyville. "This area's off limits to civilians!"

Twilight turned around to see two human marines holding back her five friends.

"Oh, c`mon! Let us through!" said Rainbow Dash.

"Ma'am, I'm gunna have to ask you stand back," said the other marine. "We are under direct orders not to let any civilians in here."

"Oh, that`s okay," came Fluttershy`s soft voice. "Sorry to bother you, we were just leaving anyway, right girls?"

Her implied suggestion seemed to go unnoticed.

"We jus` wanna check up on our friends!" said Applejack. "We`ll be in and out, quick as a fiddle."

"I can't allow that ma'am," said the marine. "Once again I'm under strict orders toâ€"

"Well now you`re under orders from me," said Twilight from behind. "Let them pass."

"Oh," he said as he turned his head and then let the five through. "Of course your highness."

Twilight and her friends trotted up to and greeted each other.

"Thanks Twi," said Rainbow.

"Now do tell," said Rarity. "Where are our newest acquaintances?"

"Well," started Twilight. "You really can't talk to them right now, they're still in the middle of a training exercise. Speaking of training, Rainbow Dash? What are you doing here? I thought you had Wonderbolt practice."

Rainbow just shrugged.

"It ended early today," she said.

"Any particular reason?" asked Twilight.

"Well, it may have had something to do with one of those human flying machines soaring straight through our practice area, but I'm sure it won't happen again."

"Let's hope not," said Twilight, looking a little worried.

"So where are they?" asked Pinkie Pie. "I don't see them."

"They're training in there."

Twilight pointed into the Everfree Forest.

"What?!" squeaked Fluttershy. "Oh, those poor things! I hope they're okay."

"Oh don't worry Fluttershy," said Twilight. "Their Captain tells me that the kind of environment that's in there is very similar to a typical forest they'd find on any one of their worlds."

"So, they're used to it?" asked Rainbow.

"Yep, it's like they're right at home in there."

"Well is there any way we can see how they're doin' without havin' to trot on in there?" asked Applejack, clearly scared that she may have to. "I mean, it's pretty likely that we ain't allowed in there anyway."

Twilight was easily able to see through her excuse.

"Don't worry AJ," she said. "We won't have to go in there. Thanks to the wonders of human technology, we can see how they're doing from right here."

"Nah howkin' that be?" asked Applejack.

"Just follow me girls," said the lavender alicorn before turning and heading towards the array of monitors.

Her friends followed suit, soon attracting the attention of Captain Peterson.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Ah!" said Lasky. "The Elements of Harmony, welcome! May I ask what brings you here?"

Seeing that his ship Captain recognized them, Captain Peterson decided that the five newcomers were of no real threat.

"They just wanted to check up on their human friends," said Twilight. "It is the _friendly _thing to do."

"Ummâ€¦oh-_kay," _said Lasky. "But are you _sure _you wanna see this? It gets pretty intense."

"We came here fur a reasn`" said Applejack. "We ain`t gunna turn away now. Right girls?"

"Uh-huh!" said the other four in unison.

"Alright then," said Lasky. "Corporal, pull up Fireteam Icebreaker`s helmet cams."

"Aye sir."

"Who`s an Ice-breaker? They must not like the cold," said Pinkie as the six nearest monitors switched to each individual member of Fireteam Icebreaker.

"It`s the collective codename for the six-man _Fireteam _that each of your friends are a part of," said the ship Captain.

"Okey dokey lokey!"

"Uhhâ€¦alrightâ€¦I guess?" said Thomas awkwardly.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Rarity now looking at the screens. "They really are deep in those woods!"

"Yes they are little lady," said Captain Peterson. "Hold on, are they separated from their platoon? They`re all by themselves out there."

"They`re probably just scouting ahead," said Lasky. "They _are _a scout-sniper squad after all."

Lasky then pointed at a group of six moving blue dots on the holographic map, far ahead of a much larger group of nearly fifty stationary dots further south.

"That`s Icebreaker right there," he said. "And that must be the rest of Alpha platoon. They currently appear to be holding their position, probably waiting for Icebreaker`s assessment of the terrain."

Captian Peterson decided to stay by the holo-table, watching the battle as a whole unfold. The rest of the group continued to watch the Fireteam`s helmet cams on the monitors.

"They`re not talking to each other," observed Rainbow Dash. "Why are they just using a bunch of hand signals?"

"It`s called silent team communication," explained Lasky. "It`s commonly used when performing stealthy tasks, such as reconnaissance missions."

Lasky gestured to the screens in front of him at the end of that last statement, implying that that was what Icebreaker was doing.

On screen, the group could see that Fireteam Icebreaker was using maneuver tactics. One or two men stood behind a tree with their weapons at the ready while the rest moved to another area of cover, and then repeated the process with the next two men. They were ever ready to fight any enemy that may come their way, though it was quite unlikely since it was a big forest _and_ the game had just begun. Still it didn't hurt to take precautions.

Captain Peterson came back over to the monitors.

"They should be approaching some kind of clearing by now," he said.

On screen, the team was, in fact, approaching a tree line. Beyond laid a seemingly abandoned, medieval-style castle. It was in ruins; the midsection of the building appeared to have halfway fallen in on itself, and all that remained were two towers on either side of the foundation as well as a few windows around a central doorway at the front. A canyon separated Icebreaker from the castle, bridged only by an old and ever weakening wooden rope-bridge.

"Wait," said Twilight. "Isn't that the castle of the two sisters?"

"The one that nearly scared us all to death?" said Fluttershy.

"Well, not me," said Rainbow. "But, you know."

"It appears so," said Celestia, a concerned look adorned on her face.

"Oh shit," said Captain Peterson. "My bad, princess. I told them that once the game started, _anything_ would be up for grabs. It seemed only logical then that they'd go for that castle. It's a very strategic point if you ask me."

"Oh it's quite alright," she responded. "I'd actually like to see what your men will do with it."

** . . . **

August 6, 2558

1507 hours

Everfree Forest

Near the Castle of the Two Sisters

Fireteam Icebreaker stood crouched just behind a tree line overlooking the castle. It was at this point that they decided to speak again with their voices instead of using mere hand signals.

"There she is," said Jenkins in a low voice. "Should we radio

back?"

"Yeah," whispered gunny. "You do that while we set up."

"Aye gunny," said Jenkins before moving back a few yards to send a radio transmission.

Meanwhile, gunny got right to work.

"Okay. Marcus, you find a good overwatch position to cover our rout in," he ordered. "Sidney, go be his spotter."

"Aye gunny," said the two in their unified, low voices.

"Sir? Weren't we ordered to stay back?" asked Private Eugene Phillips.

"Yeah, but this could be our only chance to secure this place, Shifty," said gunny. "I don't wanna risk this strategic point getting into enemy hands."

"But what if we're attacked while we're in it?" asked Sergeant Alex Thompson. "We won't last five minutes!"

"While they're attacking, the rest of Alpha can come in from here and flank 'em. They'll have no choice but to fall back if that happens."

"Okay, but you'll be disobeying a direct order."

"What're they gunna do? Court-martial me? Sometimes it takes a little insubordination to win a war."

"It also takes the same amount to get yourself killed. You sure you know what you're doing?"

"Of course, Alex, when have I ever gotten you killed?"

"Well, I am still here gunny."

"Exactly. So once Jenkins is finished with his call and Marcus and Sidney are in position, Shifty, Jenkins, and I will cross that bridge. You stay here and set up your SAW. You are to provide cover fire if things go south. Got it?"

"Aye sir."

"â€|We're in position gunnyâ€|" said Corporal Marcus Williams over gunny's helmet radio.

"Rodger, good hunting," gunny radioed back.

Up on the nearby rock where Marcus and Sidney lay prone, a conversation began between the two.

"Oy, Sidney?" said Marcus as he looked through his sniper scope.

"Yeah?"

"You still think this is a dream? I mean, we're fighting for multicolored ponies! Doesn't that say something to ya?"

"I dunno mate, it seems pretty real to me. But hey, even if it is, it's one I'll never forget for as long as I live."

Sidney brought up his DMR and aimed through the scope.

"I'll spot using the scope on this gun; I'm not gunna bother taking it off though, just so you know."

"Gotcha."

"You see anything in the castle?"

"Nope, nor anywhere else. There's something fishy going on here though, you feel it?"

"Yeah."

Meanwhile, back on the ground, Jenkins had just finished his transmission and had walked back over to the rest of his squad.

"So what's the plan?" he asked.

Gunny pointed a hand at the wooden bridge.

"We're gunna cross that bridge and recon the castle," he said before putting a hand to his helmet radio. "Corporal? Are the windows clear?"

"Yes sir," came Marcus' voice. "The whole castle looks completely deserted. You should be clear."

"Rodger," said gunny back before turning his attention back to the three marines in front of him. "Alright, I'll take point as we cross the bridge, Jenkins has got the middle, and Shifty you take the rear. Sarge'll stay back with the SAW. Everyone got it?"

Everyone nodded.

"Alright," said gunny. "Let's go."

Sarge got into a prone position behind a tree, the barrel of his SAW sticking out past it, as Jenkins, gunny, and Shifty ran for the bridge. Once they got there, gunny, then Jenkins, and then Shifty got on the bridge and quickly, but carefully, began to cross it. Once they were three-fourths of the way across, they seemed to be in the clear.

Suddenly, gunfire erupted from the castle.

"Shit!" yelled gunny as red paint from the sim-munition rounds being fired at them tore at the bridge around them.

Since the group was almost across the bridge when they were fired upon, they quickly made it across and dived behind some bush cover. Luckily for them, the bushes were thick enough to block the majority of the rounds being fired at them, and as if they weren't lucky enough, miraculously, none of them had been hit.

"God_dammit!" _Shifty blurted out, a look of pure terror on his face, before blind-firing a few shots above the bush.

As the three of them lay prone behind their makeshift cover, Ogden was the first to state the obvious.

"We`re pinned down, gunny!" he shouted, with one hand on his helmet and his rifle in the other. "We gotta get them offa us!"

Gunny wasted no time, remaining calm despite the circumstances; his years of combat experience were kicking in.

"Roger that!" he shouted back to the PFC before bringing a hand up to his helmet radio. "Sergeant! Lay down cover fire!"

"Already on it!" came Alex`s voice as gunny began to observe that rounds from Alex`s SAW were flying over the bridge.

Meanwhile, back on the rock at the tree line, Marcus and Sidney had already started going to work.

"Targets in the windows around the door," said Sidney, spotting with his DMR. "They`re two, three-man machine gun teams."

"Roger," said Marcus as he took aim.

He fired his four shots, dropping both gunners and their spotters. The third man in each group either fled or ducked back under the window.

This was followed immediately by a lull in the gunfire.

"You`re clear, gunny," said Sidney over the helmet radio while Marcus reloaded. "Hurry back across the bridge!"

"Roger that!" gunny said back before pushing Ogden to his feet. "Go! Go! GO!"

The three marines got up and booked it for the bridge. They were only halfway there when they came under fire again, not from endless machine gun fire from SAW`s, but from a single shot that impacted the ground right next to Ogden`s left foot.

"Fuck!" yelled Shifty as another shot whizzed right past his head. "Snipers!"

"Take `em out Marcus!" ordered gunny over the radio before shouting at the two teammates in front of him. "Serpentine! Serpentine!"

"Sniper, top floor of the tower on the right," said Sidney back up on the rock. "Another in the left, same level. I'll suppress the one the right, you go for the left!"

"Gotcha," responded Marcus while Sidney began firing on the tower to the right.

A few seconds later, Marcus fired. He saw his target`s chest explode with red paint, the force of the hit knocking him down behind the

window.

"First one's down," he said before turning his scope on the other tower.

By this time, the clip in Sidney's DMR had only five shots left. Marcus could see that the suppression fire Sidney was giving was working; the enemy sniper appeared to have taken cover.

"Alright, I'm out," said Sidney as his clip ran out.

An eternity seemed to pass as the Corporal kept his sights trained on the window. He saw his target cautiously peek out from behind his cover, but then quickly pull back. By this time, gunny, Shifty, and Jenkins had almost made it back across the bridge. Seeing but one opportunity left to make a kill, the remaining enemy sniper then slowly peeked his barrel out of the window and took aim at the three marines. When Marcus saw the first glimpse of his target's helmet, he fired.

Through his scope, Marcus could see the red paint from the _sim-munition _round hit the top of the enemy sniper's helmet. He saw his head snap back on impact, and then witness his body fall to the floor behind the window.

"Target down," said Marcus coolly.

"Good shot, mate," said Sidney.

Meanwhile, Alex had repositioned his SAW in the crotch of a different tree, still aiming at the castle as his teammates ran towards him and the forest beyond. But right before they reached the tree line, one last shot rang out from the castle.

Shifty went down with a cry of pain.

He had been hit in the leg. His teammates heard him fall and immediately turned ran to his aid. Jenkins ran to pick him up while Alex and gunny moved in front of him and fired their weapons at the castle. Sniper fire could be heard as Marcus shot at the enemy marine that had shot his buddy.

"Was that a DMR shot?" asked Sidney.

"Yeah," Marcus responded.

"Did you get him?"

"Nah, but I scared him off."

"Alright."

Back on the ground, Jenkins had managed to get Shifty on his shoulders in a fireman's carry.

"I got `em!" he grunted. "Let's go!"

Jenkins ran back into the woods with Shifty on his back; gunny and Alex fired one more volley at the castle before doing the same.

Back on the rock, when Sidney saw that his teammates had made it safely back into the forest, he tapped Marcus on the shoulder, and the two pulled back off the rock.

** . . . **

August 6, 2558

1515 hours

Everfree Forest Tree line

Field Combat Training Grounds

The eyes of Captain Peterson, Captain Lasky, Princess Celestia, and the Mane Six remained glued to the TV screens, even though the entire ordeal that they had just witnessed was now over.

The Mane Six remained in stunned silence, while Celestia and the two Captains almost immediately began to analyze what they had just seen.

"Well, that was kind of stupid of them to just run in there like that," said Captain Peterson.

"I think it was worth it if you ask me," said Captain Lasky. "Because of their actions, they and their entire platoon now know that at least an entire enemy platoon must be in that castle now. If you ask me, it's better they get shot at than all of Alpha."

"How do they know an entire platoon might be in there? That could've been just another scouting party like them. The castle itself could be vacant now and they wouldn't even know!"

"Well the thing is, Peterson, you and I both know that it isn't."

Lasky pointed at the holographic map, which showed a multitude of red dots inside the castle.

"All of Charlie Company is in there," he continued. "The best thing they can do now is assume the worst, and with that knowledge, prepare for the worst."

"Seems to make sense," said Celestia. "But none of this explains why Charlie Company failed to hit your Fireteam."

"The sun was in their eyes," said Peterson. "When the skirmish broke out, the sun was facing the castle. What this does is throw off their aim just enough for them to miss, as well as illuminate them for enemy snipers, which in this case happened to be Corporal Marcus Williams."

"Was that planned?"

"Hell if I know. Some of our men have so much combat experience that some things, at this point, are just instinctive."

"Intriguingâ€¦|What happens to those who were hit?"

"Those with hits in fatal areas are considered 'dead,' and they'll be picked up by pelican at the end of the day," said Lasky. "According to the rules, guys like Private Eugene Phillips, who got hit in the leg, or in a 'non-fatal' area, will be 'fully healed' after thirty minutes."

"Wow, you've really thought this through. So what now?"

"Now, we wait. After skirmishes like that, there are usually lulls in the battle, periods of time where the men plan for the next assault."

Meanwhile, the Mane Six had finally found their words.

"Thatâ€|wasâ€|AWESOME!" squealed Rainbow Dash.

"Rainbow!" exclaimed Rarity. "How could you possibly defend such barbaric actions?!"

"Soâ€|violent," said Fluttershy with her face in her hooves, shivering as if it were 30 degrees colder outside.

"Well, it did seem pretty coordinated," said Twilight.

"Not you too Twilight," complained Rarity.

"Hey, you girls are the ones that wanted to check up on them. What else did you expect to see? Our newest friends are professional warriors! How else do you think they train?"

Rarity stayed silent.

"They train for war," said Twilight. "Because that`s what they`re best at and what we need them for."

"Why are they using red paint?" said Pinkie Pie. "If you ask me, it should totally be green!"

The other five just stared at her.

"What?" she continued. "It`s to simulate changeling blood."

"Uh, Pinkie?" said Rainbow Dash. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just fine. Why?"

"Oh no reason. It`s just that that was kindaâ€|dark."

"What? I was only giving a suggestion!"

The others then looked away as if to say, "O-_kay" _and went back to watching the screens along with Celestia and the two Captains.

** . . . **

August 6, 2558

1525 hours

****Everfree Forest****

****Fireteam Icebreaker****

The six marines of Fireteam Icebreaker were running through the dense foliage of the Everfree Forest. Jenkins had Shifty on his back in a fireman's carry while the other four ran beside him in a defensive perimeter around him.

"Hey Jenkins?" said Shifty. "You know you can put me down now. I don't think we're being followed."

"Oh really?" said Jenkins sarcastically. "When did that happen? Last I checked you couldn't even walk!"

"Like, five-hundred yards ago! My leg doesn't even hurt anymore. It was just red paint y`know."

"Hold on just a little longer Shifty," said gunny, who was jogging in front of Jenkins. "I see Alpha dead ahead."

"Friendlies coming in on our twelve!" shouted one of Alpha Platoon's marines. "Check your fire!"

Alpha was entrenched in a small ditch-like depression on the forest floor. Jenkins stopped by some rock cover to set Shifty down while the rest of Icebreaker sat down to catch their breath.

"So, does this mean I'm out?" said Shifty, referring to the red paint on the back of his leg.

"Nope, just means you have to act wounded by limping around for the next half-hour," said Lieutenant Daniel Dietz as he approached the six-man group.

"Sorry LT, but we ran into some trouble back there," explained gunny rather vaguely.

"Yeah, we dug in as soon as we heard gunfire from your area. Mind telling me what happened?"

Gunny stood up and looked directly at his commanding officer's face as he spoke.

"I'll give you the truth, sir. I disobeyed your order and approached the mansion without your consent. We came under fire from the castle and just barely managed to escape, costing Private Phillips to lose his leg for the next twenty-five minutes. It was my decision, sir, and I accept full responsibility."

"It's okay, Alvarez," said the Lieutenant. "I understand, and I actually don't think you could've pulled off anything better, you managed to make it out of there without losing a single man. That's actually quite a victory."

"Thank you sir."

"But I'd really like to know what kind of intelligence you gathered. You said you came under fire from the castle itself? Could you tell

how many were in there?"

"No sir, I didn't have the best view, but I think Corporal Williams had better eyes on."

"I did, sirs," said Corporal Williams. "I only saw two, three-man machinegun teams and two snipers. I managed to down both snipers and take out two men in each machinegun team. I don't suspect that there were any more in there, but it would probably be in our best interests to not be too aggressive with this one."

"We could've just taken out a simple scouting party like ourselves," said Ogden. "And the entire castle could be vacant right now, or, at worst, both Charlie and Delta platoons could be in there right now, holding the high ground."

"Trust us sir," said gunny. "It looks way too easy to dig in inside that castle. We got lucky; the sun was in their eyes. So trust us when we say that a full-blown frontal assault right now could be suicide."

"Well Alpha doesn't attack from the front, now do we?" said Lieutenant Dietz.

"No, sir. That's what humans did in the old days."

"You got that right. So, thanks to your reconnaissance, I can now formulate a decent plan."

"What've you got?"

"Gather 'round."

The Lieutenant knelt down next to a dry patch of dirt. Fireteam Icebreaker came and stood in a circle around it as their commanding officer smoothed it out.

"Sergeant?" he said. "Your knife please."

"Just don't get it too dirty," said Sergeant Alex Thompson as he handed him his combat knife.

"So here's the plan," said the LT as he drew a square in the dirt with the knife. "We're going to move out at 2200 or 2300 and commence the attack at midnight. This square is the castle"

He then drew a circle around it.

"and this is the hill it sits on. Alvarez? What route did you and your men take in?"

He handed gunny the knife.

"Well, there was this canyon separating us from the hill," said gunny, drawing two parallel lines next to the circle to represent the canyon next to the hill before drawing another two parallel lines connecting the two ends of the canyon. "And there was this narrow, rope bridge here to allow passage. This route we definitely wouldn't recommend. The only way you're getting across this bridge is single-file, and it's completely exposed to the front of the

mansion."

He drew an X over his drawing of the bridge.

"Simply put, we'd be sitting ducks. So we're not gunna go that way. Before we moved in, I believe I saw an open field west of the castle. Sidney? I'm pretty sure you got a better view of that field than I did from your position on the rock."

"Yes sir," said Sidney, pointing to the left of the square. "There is a field to the castle's west, but it isn't exactly wide open, mate. I observed some tall grass that could be used to cover our approach."

The private then pulled out his own combat knife.

"Also, I did happen to observe a somewhat hidden entrance to the castle's east," he said as he drew another bridge on the right side of the square. "While there were windows overlooking this pathway as well, I think this would be an ideal infiltration point, assuming that there aren't any guards _in_ those windows."

"Good observation Sidney," said gunny. "LT, do you think that while the bulk of Alpha is assaulting the castle, me and my squad can infiltrate the structure from this back entrance?"

"I don't see why not," said Dietz.

"But what's our plan once inside?" asked Jenkins.

The Lieutenant thought for a moment before snapping his fingers at the arrival of a new idea.

"I've got it!" he stated. "Why don't you take out their commanding officer, Lieutenant Evans?"

"How will we know where he is?" asked Alex.

"Trust me, I know Fred. He'll be as far from the battle as possible. He really isn't the kind to lead from the front like me."

"So because his platoon can be subject to attack from almost all directions," said gunny. "We can easily conclude that he'll be hiding out towards the center of the castle?"

"Precisely," said the LT. "So that's where you'll need to look. Your mission is then, essentially, to cut the head off the snake so the body will die."

"But what about Delta Platoon? Couldn't they also potentially be in there?"

"Sir!" came the voice of a radio operator. "Lieutenant Ackerson has engaged with Delta Platoon about one mile east of our location."

"Thank you Private," said the LT, turning back to the six men around him. "Well now we know the answer to that question."

"Sir? While my team and I are sneaking in," started gunny. "What will

you be trying to do?"

"For us, it'll be your standard direct-action raid," said Lieutenant Dietz. "All of us will be using the night vision setting on the heads-up-displays of our gas masks. We'll begin the assault under the cover of darkness from the tall-grass field to the west, and from there the objective will simply be to take that castle by whatever means necessary."

"Oorah," said Shifty as he shook out his leg, loosening it up.

The seven marines then shared a quick chuckle before spreading the word of the plan around the makeshift encampment.

15. Chapter 14: Training Day (Part 3)

****Chapter 14: Training Day (Part 3)****

****August 6, 2558****

****2130 hours****

****Everfree Forest****

****Alpha Platoon's Makeshift Encampment****

Fireteam Icebreaker sat in a circle in a small ditch, each eating an MRE.

"You know, I'm glad they decided to improve the quality of our food supply," said gunny. "Remember when you'd rather die than eat one of these things?"

"Hell yeah," said Shifty with his mouth full. "Those were the glory daysâ€|"

"I think it's 'cause they've actually had the time to make them better since the war ended," said Sergeant Thompson.

Suddenly, Jenkins began to chuckle to himself.

"What's so funny, mate?" said Sidney. "You've been awfully quiet up until now."

"Yeah, c'mon then," said Marcus. "Tell us the news."

"Well, it's just that," said Jenkins, still slightly chuckling. "It's just the fact that last night all of us slept with some pony."

They all then began to chuckle, for they had to admit, it was kind of funny.

"Now, when you guys said that you'd slept with them," said Jenkins. "Did you mean, like, in their beds?"_

"Whoa, hell no," said Shifty immediately. "The hell are you thinking? We just meant somewhere in their houses. I mean, me? I slept in one of the guest rooms in Sugar Cube Corner. Marcus? Didn't you say that, while Rarity slept on one of her, like ten queen-sized beds, you

slept on her only king-sized one?"

"Yeah, and on the other side of the hallway too," said the Corporal. "I insisted that that be where I slept too, and she agreed without a second thought!"

"You lucky bastard," said Sidney. "Fluttershy put me on the couch on the first floor of her house surrounded by a bunch of snoring animals!"

"You poor child!" said Sergeant Alex sarcastically. "I had to sleep in a barn with nothing but hay under me and a thin blanket for warmth, all while surrounded by animals that smelled like shit!"

"I thought you enjoyed being on a farm again Alex," said gunny. "Didn't you grow up with that kind of stuff?"

"Yeah, but we would never actually sleep _in the barn!_ Anyway, Jenkins? Why exactly did you ask that question?"

They all stared intently at him.

"Ohâ€|" he said very awkwardly. "No reasonâ€|"

Shifty caught on immediately.

"You dirty boy!" he said jokingly, punching Jenkins in the shoulder. "You were in bed with her!"

"Okay, but we were as far apart from each other as possible when we got in!" said Jenkins. "Now can we please change the subject?!"

"Why? You brought it up!"

By this point, everyone in the small ditch had erupted in laughter, and just outside the Everfree forest, a rainbow-maned pegasus blushed furiously as her five friends and a princess all looked at her.

** . . . **

August 6, 2558

2305 hours

Everfree Forest

Near the Castle of the Two Sisters

Lieutenant Daniel Dietz stood crouched in the field west of the castle; the marines of his platoon were crouched around him among the tall grass. Darkness surrounded them, and all had donned their gas masks and had their night vision setting turned on.

"Comms check," said Dietz into his helmet mike.

"Fireteam Hawk reporting."

"Fireteam Wolf is all accounted for."

"Fireteam Juno is all set."

"Fireteam Ivy is ready."

"Fireteam Sword ready to go."

"Fireteam Charlie ready to go."

"Fireteam Icebreaker is in position east of the castle," came gunny's voice into Daniel's helmet.

"Remember the plan Alvarez," he responded.

"Roger."

"Solid copy Icebreaker. All other Fireteams, move up!" said the lieutenant as he raised a fist before extending it into a hand and pointing it forward. He then raised his own MA5D assault rifle as a symphony of "Oorah"s erupted into his helmet. "Let's get tactical marines!"

The grass suddenly gave way to about one-hundred meters of an open field of short-grass between the tall grass field and the castle. As the marines sprinted across the short but open expanse, their rifles raised, they encountered little resistance.

But after the first fifty meters or so, all hell broke loose. Gunfire burst from the castle windows and a few of the lieutenant's men went down; a few paint grenades burst, tossing some marines to the side like the dirt kicked up by the explosion.

"Move up men!" shouted Dietz through the maelstrom as he ran towards the castle, firing his rifle in burst all the while. "Move up!"

The marines managed to consolidate and lay down an effective line of fire, taking out a designated marksman in a second-story window and two machine-gunners on the first floor. This created a short lull in the fire coming at them, allowing them to charge forward and take cover next to the windows.

"Fire in the hole!" shouted one marine as both he and the LT tossed a paint grenade inside.

** . . . **

On screen, the explosives went off inside the castle, and a flash of light momentarily illuminated the ground around the group of ponies and humans who watched. Then, the marine subordinate who had thrown his grenade in with the lieutenant jumped inside, followed by two more.

"Sweet Celestia!" exclaimed Rarity, seemingly unaware of the princess she just named right beside her. "This is just barbaric!"

"This is intense!" squealed Rainbow Dash. "I'm sooo glad we're staying here all night for this!"

"I find it quite intriguing how they manage to stay so focused under such circumstances," said Twilight.

"Well it`s like I said," said Lasky. "It`s those years of experience kicking in again. Corporal, let`s check on Icebreaker now, see what they`re up to."

"Aye sir."

All of a sudden, as the feed from Lieutenant Dietz`s helmet cam showed him jumping through the window behind two of his men, the screens switched from the chaotic scene to a much more quiet picture on the other side of the castle. Five other screens depicted a similar setting; it was feed from all six of the helmet cams of Fireteam Icebreaker.

"Sounds like it`s time to go," said one of the marines.

"That`s `cause it is time Shifty," said another.

"Hey! I recognize those guys!" cried Pinkie. "That`s Fireteam Icebreaker! They same humans we all met!"

"Uh, yeah Pinkie," said Rainbow. "That`s what Lasky told us like, two seconds ago! Right before he switched to them."

"I know, I'm just saying, isn't it weird how all the humans we met are all on the same combat group?"

Twilight suddenly seemed shocked by this statement.

"Y`know what Pinkie?" she said. "That is quite a coincidenceâ€|"

** . . . **

"Sidney?" asked gunny. "There any hostiles in the windows?"

The private was looking at the house through the scope of his silenced DMR.

"Only one, sir," he responded before pulling the trigger twice.

Pew-pew

Two small splatters of paint suddenly appeared on the enemy marine`s chest. The six marines of Fireteam Icebreaker could faintly hear him say "God, damn it!" as he dropped his rifle and laid down on his back.

"Target down," said Sidney.

"Alright, let`s move," said gunny as he raised his M45D tactical shotgun. "Single-file across the bridge, go!"

They moved across stealthily, gunny in the lead followed by Jenkins, Alex, Marcus, and Shifty in that order; Sidney pulled up the rear walking backwards, checking the forest behind them just in case. Alex had his SAW on his back and held his now silenced DMR in his hands; Marcus had his sniper rifle on his back and instead shouldered gunny`s battle rifle.

Unlike their comrades on the other side of the castle, Icebreaker encountered no resistance either during or after the crossing.

"Alright, we're gunna keep this as silent as possible for as long as we can." said gunny upon reaching the other end of the bridge. "Marcus, you and Sidney make your way up to the top of that tower and see if you can give good sniper cover from up there. If you can't, then let me know and then just relocate to wherever you see fit."

"Roger," said Marcus as he and Sidney then turned and entered the castle through a broken section in the wall.

"Everyone else, on me."

As they stacked up on the window, gunny peeked through it from the left as Alex did so from the right.

"Clear left," said Alex.

"Clear right," said gunny before Jenkins slowly crept through the window, followed by Shifty, himself, and then Alex.

The four of them moved stealthily down the hallway. As they came to an open room in the center, Sidney's voice came over their helmet radios.

"â€|Sir, we're in position. There's a nice hole in the roof that allows us to see a great deal from hereâ€|"

"Excellent," said gunny. "We've reached the center of the building, do you have eyes on?"

"â€|Not yetâ€|"

"What? That doesn't make sense. He should be there. LT said he'd be as far from the fight as possible."

"â€|Wait! Hold on," said Marcus. "Someone's coming from the west end through the top-floor entrance!..."

Gunny and Jenkins peeked out towards the walkway (gunny was standing and Jenkins was crouching), aiming down the sights of their guns. They could just make out multiple shadows approaching the doorway.

"Multiple contacts," said Jenkins. "If it's him, then he's got an escort."

"Marcus, if it's him, take the shot," said gunny. "Then we'll focus on cleaning up that escort. If it isn't him, we'll just take `em anyway, so be ready to shoot."

"â€|Rogerâ€|"

Just a few moments later, their target came into view. Lieutenant Frederick Evans stepped into the light, flanked on both sides by two of his men.

"â€|Taking the shotâ€|"

A sniper shot rang out from above, and Evans was struck in the middle of the chest, red paint splattering on his two teammates, who were both immediately shot in the same place by precision fire from gunny and Jenkins.

They could just barely hear the dour lieutenant say, "Ah, shit."

"LT," gunny spoke into his helmet mike. "Evans is down. How are things holding up on your end?"

"â€|We`re taking heavy fire from the top floor hallway! Flank `em from behind!..."

"Roger, moving now," said gunny before turning to his teammates. "You heard him, let`s move! Lieutenant Evans must`ve set them up to cover his escape."

The four of them ran up the stairs and onto the walkway, where Evans and his two men were playing dead.

"Marcus," said gunny into the helmet mike as they stacked up on the entrance. "Nice shot! You and Sidney stay put, we`ve got this one."

"â€|Rogerâ€|"

"Stay frosty," he said before squeezing Jenkins` shoulder.

The four then moved though the hallway, their guns raised and ready, Jenkins on point, Alvarez second, Shifty third, and Alex in last on rear security. As they went, they could hear the combined-fire of a SAW gun and multiple assault rifles getting ever closer; soon, it was right around the corner.

Rounding said corner, they came face-to-face with an enemy Fireteam, though not literally; the five men were unaware of Icebreaker`s four man presence to their right. One man, as expected was in prone position firing down the hallway with a SAW, while three of his teammates were firing in the same direction with assault rifles.

The fifth and final man was arming another paint grenade. Gunny, Jenkins, and Shifty each managed to shoot one man each, taking out two marines with assault rifles and the one SAW gunner. Alex managed to turn around just in time to shoot the third man with an AR as he was turning to shoot at Icebreaker.

The final marine, seeing no other option, tossed the grenade at them before Jenkins shot him in the center of the chest; it rolled into the middle of the group.

"GRENAAADE!" yelled the PFC, his teammates crouching down and covering their helmets, as he threw his rifle aside and jumped on top of the explosive.

** . . . **

On screen, the blast lurched Jenkins about two feet off the ground

before he came crashing back to the floor, his teammates unharmed (or in this case, clean of red paint).

The front of Jenkins` entire body however, was now covered in the stuff. He was also clearly struggling for breath, as the force must have knocked the air out of him.

Lasky, realizing that innocent ponies had just witnessed this, turned to see their reactions.

Every single one of them had their hooves over their mouths in shock that a living thing would perform such an act. Lasky turned to Celestia and saw that she too had a hoof over her mouth.

"Oh my," was all she could utter.

Fluttershy had been excruciatingly quiet the entire time; so, as you can imagine, it was quite surprising when she spoke the first full sentence after the event had unfolded.

"Why? Why would he do that?" she squeaked/sobbed. She was covering her eyes as tears had begun to form.

Dashie had been hovering in place with her wings, but now was slumped on her haunches.

She removed her hooves from her mouth and asked, "Is he all right?!"

As Jenkins rolled up onto his back, she gave a hefty sigh of relief as her question was now answered. On screen, the marines were now just starting to assess what had just occurred.

"Jenkins!" said Sergeant Alex as he knelt beside his comrade, patting him on the shoulder and shaking his head in disbelief. "You are one crazy son-of-a-bitch."

"_cough* _You`re welcome," Jenkins struggled to say. "And yes, I'm fine,_ *cough* _Thanks for asking."

"You sure?" asked Alex. "It might be the blast shaking up your judgment, cause you don't look fine."

"Or sound fine for that matter," said Shifty. "It sounds like something ugly crawled into your throat and died."

"Just take it easy son," said gunny as he approached Jenkins` limp form. "And thanks."

Jenkins nodded, before laying his head down and nodding off to sleep.

** . . . **

August 7, 2558

0630 hours

Everfree Forest Tree Line

****Field Combat Training Grounds****

The morning after the attack, everyone who had been "killed" the previous day crowded onto a single pelican to be transported out. Among them was Private First Class Ogden Jenkins, who, needless to say, was more red in the face (and torso, and arms, legs, etc.) than all the others.

Upon stepping off the pelican's ramp, the marines dispersed, most going off to sit in the grass and relax after the previous day's adrenaline rush, and to also reflect on their own, individual performances and how they could improve upon them.

Jenkins was walking over to a group to do the same, when he was suddenly tackled by a cyan blur.

"Ohmygosh!" was the squeal he heard from his back. "You're okay!"

Jenkins, now on his stomach, managed to cock his head over to see Rainbow Dash tightly hugging him. He had to admit, that was pretty cute.

"Heh, it's good to see you too," he said as he ruffled her mane.

"You guys were amazing!" she exclaimed as her five friends rushed over with Captian Robert Peterson and Captain Thomas Lasky in tow.

"Wait," said Jenkins in disbelief as he looked over to where all the TV screens were set up. "You guys were watching that?"

"Uh huh."

"You saw, _all of that?_"

By now, the group was within talking distance.

"Ya dern fool!" shouted Applejack. "Why'd ya hafta go an' blow yerself up fer?"

"Would you rather we all got taken by the blast?" asked Jenkins.

"Well couldn't you have kicked it away? Or ran away? Or both?" asked Pinkie.

"I'm not sure if that would've helped as much," the marine responded. "In that confined of a space, it's too risky to assume the fuse is long enough for all of us to escape. But then again you may be right; the pin had been pulled right in front of me, so we may have actually had the time to escape. I don't know. All I do know is that it's happened and it's over; we can't do much about it now, can we?"

"Son, that was an honorable act of valor back there," stated Captain Peterson.

"Thank you, sir."

"I ought to put you in for a promotion."

"With all due respect sir, just me, sir? What about the rest of my guys? Didn't they perform commendably as well?"

The marine captain thought for a moment before saying, "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, sir. I'm honored, sir."

"You wanna see how your squad is doing right now?" asked Robert as he pointed at the TV monitors that he and his group were at a minute ago.

"Yes sir!" said Jenkins, immediately getting up and walking towards the screens, eager to see how his buddies would fare throughout the rest of the exercise.

** . . . **

That night, Delta platoon attacked the castle. Though the fight was hard, it was evident that Delta's preparation for the assault wasn't as good as Alpha's.

For one thing, their attack commenced while the sun was still setting, allowing for a little more light that made them easier targets. Also, they seemed to have gotten a little too clever for their own good, for half their force attacked, or at least attempted to, across the narrow rope bridge, where they thought their opponent wouldn't expect them to come from. As expected, they were all sitting ducks, and were taken care of easily.

As for the other half that attacked on the west side of the castle, Alpha was even more greatly prepared. Machinegun teams were on both floors this time; those that were on the first floor had men behind them whose only job was to catch grenades thrown through the window and throw them harmlessly through the hallway entrance in the back of the room, where no one was present or on guard; those that were on the second floor had men whose job was to simply throw grenades down at enemies that were getting too close. Designated marksmen were in every window, supported by sniper teams that were posted in both towers that could both observe in three-hundred-sixty degrees around the castle. Simply put, they had learnt from the castle's previous owners and were now a much more difficult target.

And to top it all off, Alpha was able to hold them off long enough to spring their trap. Bravo platoon charged out of the forest behind Delta, effectively surrounding them and "killing off" every last enemy.

At long last, the training exercise was over.

Author's Note:** Hey guys! Sorry if this chapter appeared rushed and seemed to end very abruptly, but I just wanted it over with. A humans v. humans battle just felt too cliché and it just got really boring to write. So I'm finally just putting it up so I can move on to more creative things. Thank you all for reading this fic, and I'll see you in the next chapter! I promise the next one will be **_**much **_**better :)**

16. Chapter 15: Unexpected Adversaries

****Chapter 15: Unexpected Adversaries****

****August 8, 2558****

****1300 hours****

****Canterlot****

****Canterlot Castle****

Despite the fact that the training exercise was able to successfully "warm up" an entire company of marines, Lasky had decided that it had taken far too long. In the interest of time, given that he was expecting the changelings to arrive soon, and in order to fill the ranks as quickly as possible, he had to cut the training exercise out. He concluded that it really wasn't that hard to get used to this planet's gravity anyway.

Lasky also wanted to make use of as many of the Infinity's 6,021 marines as possible, so despite the fact that half of Gypsy company had lost last night's combat training exercise, he would have the whole company deployed anyway along with Shadow company in just a few days, along with 500 marines, or about half a battalion. He then had Gypsy company's original responsibility of patrolling both Cloudsdale and Ponyville put into the hands of the other half of that battalion (another 500 marines); the two half-battalions would switch off active duty and guard duty every three months. An air wing of around 900 pilots, both naval and marine, would guard the skies above Cloudsdale, Ponyville, and Canterlot as well as support ground troops on the front lines if need be.

Visible human military presence in Equestria was now greater than ever before.

Inside Canterlot castle however, the princesses were still worried, for the changeling threat had moved ever closer to the borders of Equestria.

"During that training exercise, the changelings had moved quite some distance towards us," said Luna as the three walked over to a large table with a map on it, showing all the movements that the changeling army had made in the past few days.

"*Whistle*They've been busy," said Lasky in amazement.

"And that is not all," said Luna as both the table and her horn were surrounded by a dark blue aura.

When Lasky looked back at the map, he saw that it had changed, the changelings were even closer now.

"We believe that they're poised to strike into the Mild West next," said Celestia. "That's why that arrow is there, because we know that they'll take that route. Appleloosa is Equestrian territory, so there's no reason why they wouldn't attack there first."

"They could be attacking it right now for all we know," said Luna.
"The time is nigh."

"I'll send a few scouts their way," said Lasky. "In the meantime, I'll also prep my first deployment of marines to head for Appleloosa."

"Sound`s good," said Celestia.

"It`s a good thing I took out that training exercise."

"â€|Captain Lasky! Come in!..." came the voice of the Infinity`s A.I. from Lasky`s wrist communicator.

He brought it up in front of the two princesses before responding.

"Go Roland," he said.

"â€|Sir, we`re picking up movement just north of Canterlotâ€|"

"Can you identify?"

"â€|Uh, I'm not sure what they are, sir. They look like a combination of lions and eagles, and they`re about five miles outside the capital and closing fast!..."

Lasky looked up at the princesses and saw almost immediately the looks on their faces, telling him that they knew what was coming.

"Griffons," said the two alicorns gravely.

"Roland, dispatch two pairs of F-41`s to intercept," said the ship Captain.

"Aye sir, but that`s not all, we`re also picking up heat signatures to both the east and west, and these we can identify."

"What are they?"

"They`re both pony-like creatures, and they`re armed with what look like crossbows. The ones in the east are heading south to Stalliongrad by land, and the ones in the west are headed for Manehattan by sea."

"Son of a bitch, it`s a three pronged attack. Looks like the changelings had some allies."

"Four F-41`s are headed your way, sir. They`ve been ordered to engage on sight."

"Good, now call up two more marine battalions; have one deployed to Manehattan and the other to Stalliongrad."

"Aye sir."

Lasky disconnected and turned back to the princesses.

"It must be Gildedale and Germaney," said Luna. "If we lose

Manhattan, it will be a devastating blow to our economy and industry."

"And if we lose Stalliongrad, we'll be effectively cut off from the Crystal Empire," said Celestia.

"Then it makes sense why they'd be targeted," said Lasky. "Because both are strategic cities."

The trio walked outside onto a balcony. Above, the Infinity was now quite literally buzzing with activity, as the F-41's that had taken off and the pelicans carrying dozens of marines each flew around the massive ship like bees around a hive, before the pelicans broke off in opposite directions towards their targeted cities while the strike fighters continued to circle.

** . . . **

August 8, 2558

1300 hours (ten minutes earlier)

Canterlot

The mane six and Fireteam Icebreaker decided to have one last little get-together in Canterlot before deployment. The city had also been fortified with more men as well, for Lasky had assigned another battalion of around one-thousand marines to reinforce Castle Company and the Equestrian Capital.

The group was eating lunch in one of Canterlot's many fancy restaurants, exchanging stories and becoming ever closer with each other.

Suddenly, Gunnery Sergeant David Alvarez stood up and addressed all six ponies.

"Hey guys, I just wanted to thank you all for sticking around last night to watch us on those screens," said gunny. "I don't think you guys really understand this, but it really meant a lot to us that you did that, and again we all just wanna thank you for that."

"Oh, you're most welcome darling," said Rarity. "It's what friends are for isn't it? We'll generously give up any amount of time necessary for each other."

"Thank you," said gunny before sitting back down and turning to his teammates. "You know, I actually didn't even know that they were going to do that, did any of you?"

"Not really," said Marcus. "I had a hunch when I saw those TV monitors before going inside the forest, but I never actually thought that that was what they were doing."

"Well, you know. Big brother is always watching," said Shifty with a mouth full of sandwich before swallowing and putting a hand in front of him in defense. "I'm kidding."

The group shared a hardy laugh that dissipated as they heard shouts in the room, along with, "What in Celestia is that?!" and, "What's

going on?!" among the bewildered faced of the ponies in the restaurant.

Outside, they could see ponies standing in place with their eyes fixed on the sky, and marines doing the same with their guns.

"Let`s get out there Icebreaker," said gunny to his men.

"Wait! But I'm not done with my sandwich!" said Shifty as his teammates rushed for the door.

"Shifty! Outside, NOW!" Sergeant Alex called back to him.

"Shit," the private said to himself before he placed his sandwich between his teeth. "Grd dongit!" came his muffled voice as he grabbed his DMR and sprinted after his squad.

Outside, the Fireteam saw what had disturbed the peace, for in the distance coming towards them was what seemed to be a massive flock of giant birds. As they came closer, while every human remained baffled as to what they were, every pony helped them out with the identification.

"GRIFFONS!" yelled everypony before scattering in pure panic.

The mayhem was short-lived however, as four F-41 strike fighters screamed overhead, seemingly just a couple hundred feet above the buildings, straight for the enemy flock.

"Holy horseapples! Whoa!" squealed Rainbow Dash as she and her five friends ran out of the restaurant to join their human companions, speeding aircraft unsurprisingly tickling her fancy.

The four planes split into two groups, a flight leader and his wingman in each; one went right and the other went left, forming a pincer. Each aircraft then unloaded their pair M6088 ST/MMP "Medusa" missiles, each hitting their target with precision and hurling shrapnel out to other griffons, knocking them out of the sky. They then followed up by flying straight inside the cluster while firing their two M1075 machine-linked autocannons with deadly accuracy.

As the F-41`s completed their pincer and regrouped to come around for another pass, the marines on the ground all cheered as nearly fifty griffons fell out of the sky. The celebration, though morale boosting, was short-lived as the troops came to realize that the griffons had numbered around five hundred, and were still coming, confirming that they were indeed hostile.

"Are those AA-guns operational?" said a nearby lieutenant colonel, the commander of the battalion guarding Canterlot, to one of his nearby radiomen.

"Yes sir!" the marine subordinate responded.

The officer then picked up the radioman`s receiver and said, "This is Lieutenant Colonel Mathew Adams to all AA-gun emplacements! Engage! Engage! Engage!"

M71 Anti-Aircraft Guns roared to life in the distance, firing high explosive incendiary/armor piercing ammunition straight into the

flock of griffons; what followed was a grim spectacle of griffons being tossed around like ragdolls, crashing into one another and/or blowing up into multiple, flaming body parts.

In ten seconds flat, the once menacing cluster of griffons was now in burning shambles. Most griffons went straight down at a near ninety-degree angle, not even making it to the cliff at the edge of the city; these were the ones that had presumably died instantly. The rest were seemingly barely alive as they appeared to struggle, and fail, to keep themselves airborne, and came crashing towards the city, knowing that, with their backup now dead or burning-to-death, capture and imprisonment waited for them within, assuming they survived the impact.

"Incoming!" yelled Ogden as one such missile came barreling towards them. "Get down!"

He grabbed Rainbow Dash, pulled her to the ground, and shielded her with his body, the rest of Icebreaker doing the same to the other five ponies as the griffon blazed just feet above them to crash down just ten feet behind them.

As the dust settled, the interstellar dozen got up and slowly approached the once majestic winged creature. Icebreaker moved ahead of the mane six in a semicircle, their guns raised as they closed in around it.

It began to stir, confirming that it was still alive. Icebreaker then halted their advance just feet from the griffon, their guns still trained on it. She was lying on her side, appearing to try to sit up; the pain was too much however, as there appeared to be shrapnel and burn wounds all along the right side of her body, her right wing broken and burning.

"Wait! It can't be," said Rainbow Dash in recognition before running past the marines without warning.

"Rainbow! Don't!" Ogden shouted at her as every marine reflected the same thought on their faces, stunned at the mare's sudden decision.

But the cyan pegasus didn't even appear to acknowledge his presence as she slowly knelt in front of the griffon.

"No, no, no," she said softly, her eyes becoming misty as she lifted the griffon's left claw and looked into her eyes. "G-Gi-Gilda? Y-your wing?"

As Ogden came up beside Rainbow with his assault rifle still pointed at Gilda, he asked, "You know this one?"

She nodded.

"Awkwaaard!" said Shifty.

Suddenly, Gilda coughed, then spoke in a very hoarse voice, "Rainbow?"

"Yeah?" the pegasus responded, her mouth forming a small smile.

"Heh, long time no see friendâ€|"

Dash wiped some tears from her face.

"Same," she choked.

"Dashâ€|" she said as she suddenly pulled out a small, one-handed crossbow with a fire-tipped arrow on it from under her arm. "I'm sorry."

"Wha-?" said Rainbow before Ogden tackled her out of the way just as Gilda pulled the trigger, sending the arrow past her and Jenkins.

Straight into Sidney`s stomach.

The private recoiled a little at the impact, before aiming his DMR and sending two rounds into Gilda`s stomach and one through her skull.

"NO! NOOOOOOOO!" screamed Rainbow as she shoved Jenkins off of her before running towards Gilda's corpse. "Oh no, Celestia please! NAHAHAHOOOOOOO!"

Suddenly, Sidney felt a white hot burning sensation burst through his lower torso; as his gun clattered to the ground he looked down at the projectile that had hit him to find that the head had gone through his fatigues.

The mane six, minus Fluttershy, who was now on her side covering her eyes and softly screaming, watched in horror as he collapsed onto his back, clutching the arrow in his stomach and screaming in agony. Sergeant Alex ran over to him and knelt beside him.

"Medic!" he shouted as he put a hand on Sidney`s shoulder to keep him still. "Mediic!"

Surprisingly, there didn't seem to be any around.

Then, Sidney stopped screaming and started taking quick, deep breaths before speaking.

"Sarge," he said, the tone in his voice clearly showing the pain he was still in. "Sargeâ€|"

"Shh, save your breath Sidney!" said Alex. "Save your strength."

"Sarge!" he said forcefully as he grabbed the NCO by the collar and pulled him in. "G-Getâ€|Fluttershy!..."

Alex looked over at the butter-yellow pegasus. He then looked back at the private, nodding in understanding before leaving his side to get the young equine.

** . . . **

August 8, 2558

****1400 hours****

****Canterlot Library (Twilight Sparkle`s Previous Home)****

Fluttershy was at a loss; a wild mix of emotions was swirling around in her head, and she could barely concentrate with a mind so flooded.

The city was in lockdown, and the group had taken refuge inside Twilight`s old library.

The creature before the butter-yellow pegasus had ended the life of another, and now she and a marine medic who had shown up on the way here were now tasked with making sure that he recovered. She had become good friends with Sidney, and would try all she could to save his life, but she now found herself questioning whether or not he deserved an extended life at all.

Had sheâ€¦made a bad friend? Was there such a thing in this universe?

Sidney was on a wooden table which had been covered with food ready to eat, but was cleared rather untidily for him as there was food now littering the floor around the makeshift stretcher. He seemed to take notice of Fluttershy`s grim demeanor, and turned to everyone in the room.

"Mates?" he said. "Could you give me and Fluttershy a moment please?"

In wordless understanding they proceeded to leave, until the marine private and the yellow pegasus were the only ones left in the room.

"Ok Fluttershy, what`s wrong?" asked Sidney. "I'm sorry I killed her, but what else was I supposed to do?"

"You could have talked to her," she responded rather assertively. "Asked her why the griffons were attacking. You could've just taken her prisoner; she'd still be alive at least. Did you ever think of that?!"

"To be honest, I don't think she was in the talking mood, and most fighters would die before giving any sort of information."

Fluttershy remained silent. The look on her face clearly showed that she wasn't convinced.

Seeing this, Sidney tried a different approach.

"I don't like killing," he said, pausing to let that sink in. "I really don't. None of us do."

This surprised Fluttershy, and the marine could see it, as she was now making eye contact with him for the first time since he got here.

"But, if you don't like it, then why do you do it?" she asked. "And how do you do it so easily?"

"Because I've been doing it for quite a while now," he answered. "It's my job, and at this point, it's as easy breathing. Can you imagine what it's like to live a life where every breath you take gives you so much guilt? Each one feeling so morally wrong?"

"You poor thing," she said as she put a hoof on his chest. "Why would you take such a job?"

"I had no choice. Well, at least at the time I didn't think I had one, for we all felt that we had a moral obligation to join. I thought, as well as everyone else, that if I didn't join, Earth would be doomed. Me, one man. To this day I can't believe how naïve I was."

"Why would you stay?"

Sidney's eyes began to tear up as he pointed at the door.

"Because of them," he stated flatly. "Combat will change you. In combat, marines don't fight for flag or country, or even for the friends and family we grew up with our entire lives; in combat, marines fight for each other, for the complete strangers we were put together with. So yes, we'll pick on each other from time to time, but we will all remain loyal to each other."

He then looked back at Fluttershy, tears now flooding his eyes.

"And I'm speaking for all six of us when I say that we'll always act like we enjoy killing," he said. "But the truth is that we never did."

Fluttershy, tears flooding her own eyes now as well, embraced Sidney in the warmest hug she ever gave.

As they embraced, on the other side of the door, a young, cyan pegasus began to tear up as well, having eavesdropped on the conversation.

To avoid openly sobbing in front of her friends, she quickly flew into another room, a rainbow-colored trail outlining her exact path.

Without a word, Jenkins immediately stood up and walked towards the door. Shifty followed right behind.

Upon reaching the door, the PFC placed a hand on the private's chest without turning around. He took a quick peek behind him just to see who it was following him before looking away again.

"Shifty," said Jenkins without facing him. "I can handle this. Okay?"

Shifty looked back at gunny, who nodded his head upon eye contact. The private then turned back to Jenkins, giving him a quick pat on the back and a nod before heading back.

Without another word, Jenkins opened the door and stepped inside.

The room was dimly lit; the room was filled with isles upon isles of books. It was clearly another subsection of the library. In the corner, Rainbow Dash sobbed hysterically. Jenkins approached her without a second thought.

"Rainbow?" said Jenkins as he placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Sh-she's gone!" she choked. "She's g-gone!"

"Sssshhhhh! Sshhh! It's okay!" said Jenkins as he embraced her in a hug, trying to comfort her. "It's okayâ€|"

"No it's not!" she squeaked. "My best friend is dead and I don't know if I should be mad at you or not for it!"

"Your friend tried to kill you. What else could we do?"

"I don't know! I don't even know what's real anymoreâ€|"

"Rainbow, I'm sorry, but we did what we had to. Gilda was just following orders, and that made her a threat."

The both sat there, holding each other tightly for another minute or so. Rainbow's sobbing gradually stopped; she became quiet, but her eyes remained misty.

"*sniff*I hoped you'd never see me like this," she said.

"That's alright," said Jenkins. "That's okay. We all have a little pride, a little ego, but every so often it needs a shrink. I could tell from the start that you weren't perfect, yet you were trying to make yourself look that way."

Dash looked into Jenkins' eyes, her own eyes reflecting a mix of sadness and annoyance.

"No one's perfect Rainbow," said the marine as he stroked her mane. "Not even me. Yeah, I'll admit it; in fact, our species has a saying, 'we're only human.' We say it to remind ourselves that, while we may be pretty awesome, we've still got our limitations."

The cyan pegasus broke eye-contact, now looking at the floor.

"Look on the bright side Dashie," said Ogden, hugging her tight again. "A private experience like this only brings us closer as friends."

She looked up towards the bookshelf in front of her, registering what he had just said.

"I've lost friends too," he continued. "And believe me, it was hard, but for each one that passed, I made another one. And in a way, it's like that love never died."

Rainbow started to cry again.

"I think I've made that new friend," she said, confirming for Jenkins that these were now tears of joy. "Thank you."

About a minute later, the two of them reentered the room where the rest of Icebreaker and the mane six minus Fluttershy sat.

"Is she feeling better?" asked Twilight.

"Yeah," said Rainbow and Jenkins in unison.

They looked at each other upon doing that, then chuckled.

"Come on guys," said gunny solemnly, pointing at the door to the living room. "I think we've given them enough time."

He reentered the room with every man and pony following suit right behind him. The yellow pegasus then quickly collected herself upon seeing them.

"So how's he healing up?" Shifty asked the butter yellow pegasus.

"Very well," she responded. "His bodily fluids extinguished the fire on the tip rather quickly. From there, all I had to do was remove the arrowhead without causing any further damage, and then simply utilize some of that, bio-foam I think it's called, to clear up the wound."

"Good job," said gunny as he patted her on the back. "We're gunna need him for the fight ahead."

"And it's a good thing he knew to stay alive," said Sergeant Alex. "'Cause he knows that the only person allowed to kill him is me."

Sidney exchanged a hearty laugh with everyone in the room at that, glancing at Fluttershy to make sure that she still understood.

Thankfully, it seemed that she did.

** . . . **

August 8, 2558

1415 hours

Canterlot Castle

"I knew griffons weren't fond of us," said Celestia. "But I didn't think they'd go this far."

"And what about Germaney and Gildedale?" asked Luna. "Why are they attacking us? What did we do to them?"

"I don't care what the politics are behind all this," said Lasky. "What I wanna know ponies, is if they're gunna come around for another attack; I didn't just put the city into lockdown for no reason."

"Trust me, they won't," said Celestia. "If there's one thing we know about griffons, it's that they'll always avoid forces stronger than their own."

Lasky took a moment to look at the Griffon Kingdoms on the map.

"Well then," he said. "I guess we don't have to worry about them for now, and if they try to come back, we'll be ready for `em. Besides, we've got three other adversaries to deal with right now, so if you don't mind, I'm going back up to my ship. I can handle this kind of thing much better from up there."

** . . . **

August 8, 2558

1430 hours

UNSC Infinity Bridge

"That`s better," said Lasky as he approached the hologram table, the princesses gathering around it with him.

"Now you can command this war a little more directly," commented Roland, appearing beside the table. "Instead of having to tell me what do from the ground, you yourself can do it right here."

Lasky gave Roland a quick look of slight irritation before getting right back to business.

"So what`s the situation?" he asked.

"The griffons have been pushed back," Roland responded. "The Gildes have already taken half of Manehattan and the Germanes nearly have all of the city of Stalliongrad. The changelings are still a long ways off from the Equestrian border, so I'd recommend taking care of those already in country."

"Alright, then we'll deploy that half-battalion, along with Shadow and Gypsy companies, to Manehattan. Send our reserve tank battalion to the outskirts of Stalliongrad."

"Why the outskirts?" asked princess Celestia. "Why not send them straight in to beat back the invaders?"

"Because that's what they're expecting," said Lasky. "They expect us to meet them head on in a close-quarter battle. What they're not going to expect are hundreds of tanks to be dug in around the city, surrounding it and cutting them off from reinforcements and supplies. They'll be starved into surrender."

"And if they do not?" asked Luna.

"Then we move inside and fight. At that point, they'll be a lot less battle-ready, due to a lack of food and supplies. Point is, I want to make a close-quarter street fight a last-resort."

"But what about Manehattan?" asked Celestia. "Will you avoid it there too?"

"I'm afraid not. The land surrounding Manehattan isn't flat like it is around Stalliongrad. For this, we're going to have to go inside

the city and fight toe-to-horseshoe with the Gildes and push them back into the sea. From there, our airpower can keep them at bay, as they won't have to worry about any collateral damage out there."

The princesses nodded in understanding before Lasky pushed a button on the holo-table.

"1st Tank Battalion, get to the outskirts of Stalliongrad Wait until they've almost completely moved inside the city, then surround it and lock it down."

"Aye, aye, sir!" came a voice from the table's speakers.

Lasky then began working with the holo-table's functions in order to switch communication between battalion commanders.

"Now let's get those 500 plus marines to Manehattan," he said.

** . . . **

August 8, 2558

1500 hours

Canterlot Square

A few pelicans had come to pick up any marines-to-be-deployed that were in Canterlot at the time. One such vehicle waited in Canterlot square to pick up Fireteam Icebreaker as well as a few other squads in the battalion that were in the area at the time.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye," said Jenkins. "For now at least."

"I'll be waiting," said Rainbow softly before the two of them hugged.

"Let's go Jenkins! Come on!" shouted gunny from inside the pelican.

At that, he gave her another kiss on the cheek before darting inside the vehicle.

Rainbow held the spot on her cheek as the aircraft closed its ramp and rose into the air.

The cyan mare then lifted into the air as well as the pelican began to pull away.

A tear ran down her cheek.

"I'll be waiting," she reiterated, watching it go off towards the western horizon.

And she kept watching.

And watching.

And watching.

She watched as her friends flew off to war.

17. Chapter 16: Manehattan CQB

****Chapter 16: Manehattan C.Q.B.****

****August 8, 2558****

****1445 hours****

****UNSC Infinity bridge****

Princess Celestia, Dr. Glassman, and Dr. Halsey sat at one end of the room, while Captain Thomas Lasky was busy towards the front, commanding the battle with Roland at the holo-table. The two scientists thought that this would be a good time to talk to her and learn about her species and its history.

Their affinity was science and research after all, not war.

"Celestia, what reason would the griffons have to attack Equestria?" asked Dr. Halsey. "What reason would all these attacking countries have for that matter?"

"Well, let's start with the griffons first," said Celestia. "Before Equestria was founded, the pegasi and the griffons had made a treaty, stating that no pegasi would enter griffon airspace as long as the griffons didn't enter ours, and vice versa. As you could probably tell, there had been many skirmishes over airspace between the two races before this treaty, making that the reason it was created in the first place.

"When Equestria was founded, the griffons used that as an opportunity to gain more airspace, considering the old treaty as null and void as this was no longer "pegasi" airspace, but now "Equestrian" airspace. My sister and I tried to negotiate with their leader, who at the time was named Gregor, telling him that this was a mere technicality."

"But he would have none of it," said Luna as she approached the table, joining in on the conversation. "War seemed inevitable, but luckily I had befriended a manticore at the time, who understood griffons much better than I or my sister did, and learned of the griffons' sweet tooth."

"Wait," said Dr. Glassman, a hint of disbelief in his tone. "So are you both about to tell me that you just gave Gregor some kind of tasty treat, and he just left you alone?"

Luna and Celestia looked at each other, then back at the two human scientists.

"Pretty much," they both responded in unison.

"It was an Åclair, to be exact," said Luna.

"I can only assume that the changelings convinced them to fight us again, as mercenaries of some sort," continued Celestia, staying on

topic. "It must not have been very hard, given the story I just told."

"I was surprised that they weren't using the same weapons as the changelings," said Luna. "I guess they always were quite traditional."

Dr. Glassman visibly blinked in disbelief, as if trying to find the words for his pure astonishment, before furiously writing down notes onto his holo-pad.

"By god," he said. "This world is _strange. _Interesting, but strange."

"I prefer the term, unique," said Dr. Halsey before motioning with her robotic arm for Celestia to continue. "Please, go on."

"Of course," said Celestia. "But before I do, I just want to know, who is this deity that you humans keep referring to? I believe you call him, god?"

"Oh! No offense to you your highness," said Dr. Glassman.

Celestia giggled, "None taken."

"Sorry, it's just that, all human religions point to a single, or multiple, all powerful beings, who we would simply call, god, or gods," Henry continued. "Over time, phrases were created through language and culture like, 'Oh my god!' and things like that. Basically, a figure of speech, similar to how every pony I've talked to has said things along the lines of, 'Oh my Celestia!'"

"Ah," said Celestia in understanding.

"That _is_ rather interesting," said Luna.

"Quite," said Dr. Halsey. "Sorry if I seem rushed, but could you please continue with your story? Thisâ€|interview, is more about your species, not ours."

"Of course," said Celestia. "The next two countries go together, in that they're very similar in their origins, and conclusively, their motives. Gildedale and Germaney both broke away from Equestria shortly after its founding. Unlike the griffons, neither of them gave us very much trouble, if at all, until now, but that doesn't mean that they liked us any more than the griffons did."

"Both countries were formed under separate groups of earth ponies," said Luna. "Both believed the unison of the three pony races would undermine the purity of the earth pony species. With a mentality like that, I can only imagine how easy it must have been for the changelings to convince them both to join their cause."

"So you two knew about this all along?" asked Dr. Glassman. "Surely with this foreknowledge you must've posted guards near the borders?"

"We did," said Luna. "However, given that both armies decided to use weapons similar to those of the changelings, our guards were proven ineffective."

"Wait, how can they use those kinds of weapons?" asked Halsey. "Don't they require magic like the kind wielded by unicorns in order to operate them?"

"We aren't sure," said Celestia.

"Our best guess is that they have some kind of limited power source energizing their shots," said Luna.

"How did they get this gear in the first place?" asked Dr. Glassman

"The changelings have possibly sold it to them to increase the effectiveness of their ally's army," said Luna.

"And also quite likely to gain a profit," said Celestia. "Yes, the changelings too have an economy to drive."

"And what about the changelings themselves?" asked Dr. Halsey. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but they seem to be the root cause of the, official declarations of war by these other nations."

"If anything, the root cause is us," said Celestia. "We should've been more aware of our own neighbors. Then, maybe conflict with more than one nation could've been avoided long ago."

"Mmmâ€¦good point," mused Halsey, nodding in understanding. "No offense to youâ€¦againâ€¦"

"It's alright," said Luna. "As leaders of a nation, we should at least learn from the mistakes we have already made."

"Correct," said Celestia. "But back to your question on the changelings, as their name suggests, they are a species of shape shifters. They are designed, by evolution and magic, to impersonate equines all across the known world. The reason they do it is that they feed off of somepony else's love. If left unchecked, one changeling can become as magically potent as almost fifty."

"As I'm sure you've already heard by this point, this isn't our first encounter with them," said Luna. "About one year ago, they and their queen, Chrysalis, led a direct assault on Canterlot..."

** . . . **

August 8, 2558

1505 hours

Manehattan Square

Three pelicans coming in from Canterlot touched down in Manehattan Square. Out of one came the six marines of Fireteam Icebreaker, who were immediately approached by Captain Robert Peterson and Lieutenant Daniel Dietz.

"Welcome to the green zone boys!" said Dietz, using a voice raised over the roar of the departing pelicans. "Glad you could make it to the party!"

"Good to be here!" said gunny, raising his voice as well. "What's the situation?"

Captain Peterson waited until the airborne troop transports had departed before speaking.

"We've managed to halt their advance completely," he said. "They've barely made it past the beaches and have only a few buildings under their control. These, 'Daleponies' I think they're called, are a lot better equipped than I thought. They're armed with spears and crossbows similar to the ones that the changelings use; they appear to be powered by a battery of some sort, most likely powered by a limited amount of magic rather than magic directly from a horn. Despite the limited charge, they've been putting up a hard fight with those things."

"Unfortunately, they've figured out that if they land a shot in the face, the marine vaporizes instantly," said Lieutenant Dietz. "We almost lost an entire platoon that way."

"Those lucky enough to get out alive didn't do so before getting their bones broken," said Peterson. "I'll tell ya, these guys can buck _hard! _If we really want to end this battle as soon as possible, we're going to need to take out some leadership."

"That's where you come in," said the LT. "Recon has located the building that their commanding officer, a Miss Field Marshal Greyblade, has taken up residence. It's only a few blocks that way, close to the beachheads and the battle lines."

He pointed an open hand down the street.

"Kill or capture?" asked Sergeant Alex.

"Capture," responded the Captain. "Kill if necessary, but we need her alive. She can give us information on why they and two other countries attacked Equestria. Either way, you'll strip the Daleponies of their leadership, making them all the more easier to fight."

"Understood sir," said gunny.

"Good, now get to it marines!"

"Aye, sir! Come on boys, let's get it done!"

"Oorah!" said the other five marines as they started down the road.

** . . . **

"So it makes sense that they would want revenge," said Dr. Glassman, finishing up his notes.

"Thank you for your time Princesses," said Dr. Halsey. "I know you have a country to run and that it isn't easy to find time to talk."

"Oh, you're most welcome," said Luna, before she and her sister left

the room.

Outside, Celestia turned to Luna and said, "You go on ahead back to the castle, I'll go check with Lasky on how the war is shaping up."

** . . . **

August 8, 2558

1507 hours

Manehattan Streets

Aside from the distant sounds of gunfire and explosions, the street that Icebreaker moved down was deafeningly quiet.

"An entire platoon wasted?" said Shifty as they walked. "That hasn't happened sinceâ€¦since-"

"Hey! Focus!" said Alex. "We've got a job to do."

They moved in a line, hugging the right side of the street instead of walking down the center. Their rifles were all brought to bear, each pointed in a different direction as to cover all angles.

Suddenly, gunny held up a fist, and everyone stopped and took a knee. He then motioned over to a building across an intersection atop which enemy sentries were poised.

"Eyes on target," said gunny. "That has to be it."

"Simple breach-and-clear?" asked Ogden.

Gunny only smiled in response as a pair of wounded dalepony soldiers were seen rushing inside.

** . . . **

Field Marshal Greyblade was an armored mare with a dull, grey coat, blue eyes, and blond mane. Her body armor was gold-painted leather instead of the rusty, brown leather of her subordinates. Her mane was tied in a braid and lay upon her right shoulder to make way for her golden helmet, upon the forehead of which an emerald was adorned.

She was on the second floor, discussing a plan with one of her higher ranked subordinates when two of her wounded soldiers stumbled inside.

"Ma'am! The second front has been overrun!" said the first one.

"They brought these giant, metal death machines of some kind!" said the other. "We were the only two to just barely make it out alive to inform you!"

"Thank you for letting me know," said Greyblade. "You both may rest."

"Thank you Ma'am." they said in unison.

"Captain," said the Field Marshal after the two had left. "Get me a line to Thatchholm. We need to call for exfiltration."

"Yes Ma'am."

Suddenly, a loud explosion was heard from the first floor, followed almost immediately by the sound of gunfire and dying daleponies.

"The wounded!" exclaimed the Captain before rushing to the door.

But before he could reach it, a line of six marines burst through, knocking him onto his back and his spear out of his hooves. One of them then promptly shot the Captain in the back as he was reaching for his weapon.

On the verge of panic, Greyblade pulled out her own hoof-held weapon, fiddling with it to make sure it was loaded. But before she could bring it to bear, Alex darted forward and smacked her weapon away before pinning her to the ground with the same hand. He held her there by her two fore hooves, held together in front of her head, while one of his comrades came up to her and searched her hoof-to-tail, stopping only when he reached the honorary dagger at her hip.

"Souvenir?" asked Corporal Williams, getting up and tossing the dagger to gunny as Alex ziptied the Dalepony's hooves behind her back.

"Thanks," said gunny. "Jenkins, radio for extract, we've got our prize."

"Aye sir," said Jenkins, pulling the radio receiver off his back and to his ear. "Echo 419, this is Fireteam Icebreaker requesting exfil. The package is in our hands."

"You MONSTERS!" shouted Greyblade in anger and grief, tears now streaming down her face. "What have you done?! Have you really just killed wounded soldiers?!"

"I can't say that none were caught in the crossfire," said Alex, still holding her to the floor. "But no, almost all of 'em are still alive. We'll make sure that they're given good medical attention."

"You would aid us?" said Greyblade in disbelief. "After all the damage we've done already?"

"We may be efficient warriors," said Corporal Williams with a grin, kneeling down to her level. "But we're not monsters."

"Grid coordinates: 279045," said Jenkins. "Roger that, see you in a few. Gunny, he's picking us up at roof-level in five mikes."

"Got it," said Gunny. "Corporal, take Sydney and secure the rest of this floor while we wait."

"Aye sir," said the Corporal before making his way to the door, where

Shifty and Sydney had taken up a defensive position, each on an opposing side of the doorframe pointing their weapons in opposing directions down the hallway. "Alright Syd, let's move."

"You're clear left," said Shifty.

"Clear right," said Sydney.

Corporal Williams then walked through the door with his gun raised and with Sydney in tow, following him out the door and letting Jenkins take his place.

** . . . **

"I doubt anyone's left in this house," said Sydney. "It already looked empty from the outside."

"And yet look at how many were actually inside," said the Corporal. "You can never be too thorough in this line of work."

"And that's why you're in charge at the moment, Marcus."

The two cautiously entered another room, guns at the ready, when they heard a soft whimpering within a nearby closet.

"Sounds like a filly to me," said Marcus, the noise going quiet as soon as he said that. "It came from in there."

"Watch my back," said Sydney. "I'll check the closet."

Marcus then turned away from the closet, crouched, and shouldered his weapon as Sydney cautiously opened the small closet behind him.

Inside, the private found a dirt brown earth pony filly with pink mane and a pair of scissors for a cutie mark. Her eyes were wide in terror and she quivered in silence at the sight of the marine.

"G'dday, mate," said Sydney in his most friendly voice.

"P-Please d-don't hurt me!" she squeaked.

"Easy," a calmer tone in his Australian accented voice now as he picked her up. "I won't hurt you. None of us will. We're here to get you out."

"And what if I don't believe you?"

"Well, I'm holding you right now—are you hurt yet?"

The filly sheepishly looked at his arms, cradling her like a baby.

"No," she responded, a little calmer now.

"What's your name?" he asked after a short pause. "Mine's Sid."

"I-I'm Babs Seed."

"Do you know what happened here?"

"I-I just remember Auntie Orange tellin' me that some bad ponies were takin' over town, so she told me to hide in the closet! Iâ€¦I don't think I saw her again after that."

Her face brightens at a realization.

"Have ya seen her by any chance Sid?" she asked. "She's got a bright yellow coat and orange mane."

Sydney thought for a moment, realizing he had quite a decision to make right then. Suddenly, one red dot, then two, then three and counting began to approach the door opposite the one from which the two marines had entered.

"I have," he said, deciding to lie. "She's going to be okay. I saw her get out. And now we're here to get you out, so you can see her again."

"Do you trust us?" asked Marcus.

Babs nodded with renewed vitality. "I do."

"Good, 'cause we're about to have company!" the corporal responded as quietly as he could. "Sidney, we've got to go back the way we came, right now!"

The Australian then stood up, hugging Babs Seed as tightly as he could to his body with one arm, and arming his pistol in the other.

"I'll take point," he said, rushing to the door farthest from the red dots. "She'll be protected the most if I'm in front."

"Gotcha," said Marcus, following close behind. "Now let's move!"

Right then, an enemy dalepony burst through the opposite door. Marcus spun around in time to put two rounds from his DMR into the enemy's chest, just as the dalepony was raising his weapon to fire; this gave Sydney enough time to round the corner of the doorframe, out of sight from the remaining daleponies. The next one to round the corner exploded half the ceiling in the room after the marine corporal put a shot between his eyes while walking backwards. The third however, as he was right behind the second, had enough time to get a clean shot at Marcus; he missed by inches, but the blast was enough to throw the marine in the direction Sydney had been running, as well as knock his weapon out of his hand.

Now without a rifle and with nearly half a dozen daleponies after him, Marcus got up, pulled out his pistol, and sprinted towards Sydney while firing back at the doorway, hoping to suppress them long enough.

When he reached Sydney, he holstered his pistol and grabbed the battle rifle that was on Sydney's back as he said, "I'm gunna borrow this for a bit, if you don't mind."

"Go right ahead."

Marcus spun back around just in time to fire burst after burst into oncoming daleponies that decided it'd be a good idea to breach the doorframe. Sydney was doing the same towards the front with his sidearm.

"Friendlies coming in!" yelled Shifty as he cooked a grenade which he threw down the hall after Sydney and Marcus had dived back into the room. "Frag out!"

Jenkins and Shifty then moved away from the door as a green bolt struck the doorframe they had just been standing next to, sending splinters in all directions; right before Shifty's grenade went off with yellow flash and a deafening bang, sending blood, screams, and a couple body parts down the hall and past the doorway.

"Time to go," Sergeant Alex deadpanned as he hoisted Greyblade onto his shoulders in a fireman's carry.

"Sydney," said Jenkins, pointing at the filly in the private's arms. "Who's that?"

"An unexpected passenger," was the reply.

"Stairs to the roof are this way!" said gunny before bashing the opposite door open with his shoulder. "Move with a purpose Icebreaker!"

The team rushed single-file through the door, moved swiftly down the hallway, up some stairs and burst onto the rooftop, where they found a pelican less than a quarter-mile away closing in fast on their location.

"Pelican 096, you got any turrets on that bird?" asked Jenkins over his radio.

"You don't need to tell me twice," came a masculine voice over all of Icebreaker's helmet radios. "We're already engaging enemy ground forces converging on your building. You guys just can't make extracts at any other temperature can you?"

"That's just the way we like it, sir," responded gunny through his helmet. "Marines, this is gunna be tight. High-value targets and civvies in first!"

"Oorah!" was the unified response.

Right then, the pelican reached the rooftop, turning one-hundred-and-eighty degrees in midair so that the open end was facing the ground squad. A marine brandished the heavy turret mounted at the opening.

"C'mon boys!" he commanded in a thick Russian accent. "I've got you covered. Let's get out of here!"

Alex and Greyblade were on first, followed by Sydney and Babs, just as daleponies began to emerge from the doorway onto the roof. One by one, the members of Fireteam Icebreaker got onto the pelican as both they and the pelican gunner mowed down the flurry of enemy troops

attempting to stop them from capturing their Field Marshall.

When only gunny and Jenkins were left, a powerful green bolt of energy struck the pelican's right engine.

"She'll hold," said the pilot. "But we need to leave, now!"

"Roger, pull away!" said the gunnery sergeant immediately.

"Gunny?" asked Jenkins before Alvarez hopped inside the troop transport, just as it was pulling away.

"Jump Ogden!" shouted Marcus. "Jump!"

Without another word, Jenkins threw aside his assault rifle and sprinted towards the pelican. Seeing as it was already beyond the edge of the roof, he knew he had no choice but to jump from there. With all his strength, Jenkins leaped from the rooftop, cartwheeling his arms in hopes to grab something, anything in or on the pelican to bring him to safety. Seemingly by a stroke of luck, he caught the edge of the drop-door with his forearm; he managed to bring his other arm onto it as well but, he was slipping! Jenkins tried desperately to hold on, but it was no use. He was going to fall off!

Just as all hope seemed to be lost for the PFC, Corporal Williams' hands reached out and grabbed one of his.

"Gotcha!" said Marcus just as he saved his friend from the edge.

Gunny came over and assisted in pulling him inside as the doors closed behind them.

"You son of a bitch!" said Jenkins to gunny with playful smile and a punch to the shoulder. "I see what you did there."

"What? I-I don't understand," said Greyblade. "Your superior almost left you for dead! How are you okay with that?"

"No, it's okay," said Jenkins. "He was just trying to get me back for doing the same thing to him during a mission way back in the day."

The cuffed, grey mare simply shook her head in response as Alex strapped her into her seat.

"You are a strange race," she said.

** . . . **

_ "This is Private First Class Ogden Jenkins to _Infinity, _high value target is in custody, breakâ€|aaand we have one civilian in tow, over." _

Roger that Icebreaker, return the civilian to a safe location, then head back to ship with the HVT, over.

_ "Aye, aye, sir. Over and out." _

Roger, _Infinity_ out.

End
file.